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Gramsci's Political Thought

Carlos Nelson Coutinho

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Gramsci's Political Thought

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Gramsci's Political Thought

By

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Translated from the Portuguese by

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With a foreword by

Joseph A. Buttigieg



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For Andréa,
my wife

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Foreword

On several occasions in the course of his superb exposition, elucidation, and critical analysis of Antonio Gramsci's political thought, Carlos Nelson Coutinho draws the reader's attention to the sterility of dogmatism and much self-styled Marxist-Leninist 'orthodoxy'. There are many reasons for this, chief among them that throughout his work, from the earliest journalistic articles to almost the very last notebook-entries, Gramsci repeatedly attributed the theoretical poverty and ineffectual politics of the socialist movement to its rigid embrace of positivist philosophy and its blind faith in the immutable laws of history. Celebrating the success of the October Revolution, Gramsci characterised it as a triumph over dogma and a rejection of positivist philosophy. 'These people, are not "Marxists"', he wrote of the victorious Bolsheviks. 'They have not used the works of the Master to compile a rigid doctrine of dogmatic utterances never to be questioned. They live Marxist thought – that thought which is eternal, which represents the continuation of German and Italian idealism, and which in the case of Marx was contaminated by positivist and naturalist encrustations'. To be sure, as Coutinho rightly points out, one cannot fail to notice here the strong influence of idealist philosophy on the young Gramsci. About fifteen years later, however, in a long series of notes on philosophy, Gramsci would compose an extensive and detailed critique of *both* idealist and positivist distortions of Marxism. In one of the first notes on the subject he posed the question: 'Why has Marxism, in some of its elements, ended up

seeming assimilable to both the idealists and the vulgar materialists?' The purpose behind his inquiry was to develop Antonio Labriola's thesis that Marxism is 'an independent and original philosophy'. The task, Gramsci affirmed, is 'very complex and delicate' and calls for an approach that 'should always be critical and never dogmatic'.¹

Gramsci's anti-dogmatism and rigorously critical attitude resulted in some very serious conflicts with several members of his party, but they also enabled him to arrive at his most original and penetrating insights. The best illustration of this is provided by Coutinho in his illuminating discussion of Gramsci's explanation of why the revolutionary strategy that succeeded in the East was not applicable to the West. Gramsci's insight is encapsulated in a sentence – 'In the East, the state was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous; in the West, there was a proper relation between state and civil society, and when the state tottered, a sturdy structure of civil society was immediately revealed' – wherein one finds a convergence of his concepts of hegemony, the integral state, civil society, and war of position.² None of these concepts, which reside at the core of Gramsci's political theory, could have been elaborated by a strict adherent to the orthodoxy promoted by Moscow. This is not to say that Gramsci set out to refute Marx or Lenin; rather, as Coutinho demonstrates, he was acutely aware of the need to develop and renew Marxist thought so that it could interpret and address new historical realities. To paraphrase a remark that Gramsci made in his article on 'The Revolution Against *Capital*', Marx could only foresee what was foreseeable.

It is most unlikely that the majority of Gramsci's readers today have any interest in assessing his doctrinal purity, but the situation was different during the two decades following the publication of his prison-writings. The appearance of the *Lettere dal carcere* in 1947 was greeted enthusiastically by Italians of many different political stripes; in his review, Croce pronounced Gramsci 'one of us'. The initial reaction to the multi-volume thematic edition of the *Quaderni del carcere* (1948–51) was likewise favourable and helped establish Gramsci as one of Italy's greatest twentieth-century intellectuals. Gramsci's posthumous rise to fame, however, inevitably gave rise to a struggle over his legacy. Antagonists of the Italian Communist Party charged the editors of the first editions of Gramsci's writings with bias and manipulation, giving rise to a plethora of alternative (and often irreconcilable) interpretations of Gramsci's political thought. At the heart of many debates generated by this clash of interpretations was the question of Gramsci's fidelity to or rupture

1. Q4, §3.

2. Q7, §16.

with the orthodox Marxist-Leninist tradition. Arcane though those doctrinal disputes may seem today, some of the readings and hypotheses they generated continue to influence current interpretations of Gramsci. One example is Norberto Bobbio's version of Gramsci's concept of civil society, which Coutinho discusses in this volume.

For many years, Gramsci's real or perceived heterodoxy impeded or slowed the dissemination of his work in other parts of Europe, where the official exponents and guardians of Marxism-Leninism, unlike their Italian confrères, regarded him with suspicion. A three-volume anthology of Gramsci's writings was brought out in the USSR in 1957–9, that is, almost immediately after Nikita Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalinism. It was certainly not a coincidence that the first English and French editions of selected writings by Gramsci appeared very soon afterwards. The modest anthology, *The Modern Prince and Other Writings*, brought out, in 1957, by the two leading communist publishers of the anglophone world – Lawrence & Wishart of London and International Publishers of New York – betrays an anxiety to minimise Gramsci's differences or departures from party-doctrine. The same is true of the more substantial *Textes choisis*, published two years later by Éditions Sociales. Not surprisingly, these editions did not generate a burst of interest in Gramsci. In France, that would not happen until the very late 1960s and the 1970s, largely as a result of left intellectuals' widespread disenchantment with or indifference to the official party-line. The study of Gramsci in the anglophone world also intensified significantly in the 1970s, first in Britain – thanks, in large measure, to the *New Left Review* group and the publication of Quintin Hoare's and Geoffrey Nowell Smith's masterfully edited *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* – and, before too long, in the US and elsewhere. It was at a time when the Left had lost much of its interest in exegetical debates on the Marxist-Leninist canon and, instead, derived its theoretical inspiration from a wide range of sources – Lukács, Althusser, Marcuse, Adorno, Benjamin, Williams, and so forth – that Gramsci gained in prominence. In less than two decades, Gramscian terminology became ubiquitous in academic writings in a broad spectrum of fields ranging from cultural studies and postcolonial theory to education and anthropology. To many of today's readers and users of Gramsci, his Marxist intellectual roots are of little, if any, import; indeed, it would not be very surprising if only a few of them were thoroughly familiar with Marx's major texts, let alone Lenin's.

Unmoored from the Marxist tradition, Gramsci's insights on the relationship between culture and politics, the role of civil society in the modern state, the plight of subaltern social groups, modernity and the processes of modernisation, the function of the intellectuals, and so on, continue to prove useful

to leftists and non-leftists alike. It is, however, impossible to arrive at an adequate understanding and reliable interpretation of Gramsci's writings without a thorough appreciation of their Marxist roots. The reluctance to turn to the Marxist tradition – and, in particular, to the works of Marx and Lenin – in order to better comprehend Gramsci often stems from a seemingly-irresolvable dichotomy between the obviously open and non-doctrinaire character of Gramsci's work and the putatively dogmatic nature of Marxist theory. Herein lies one of the greatest merits of Coutinho's guide to Gramsci's political thought: he enables the reader to see how Gramsci's political thinking simultaneously emerges from and overcomes 'Marxism'. In the process, Coutinho also shows how Gramsci's dialectical treatment of classical-Marxist theory constitutes the most effective critique of its dogmatic residues and distortions. Coutinho's starting-point is the same as Gramsci's – namely, Marxism is not a dogma, even though the official guardians of Marxism-Leninism had turned it into one.

It is worth recalling, in this context, the first attempt to introduce Gramsci to a US audience. Carl Marzani, an Italian-American who emigrated to the US with his parents at the age of 12, translated a few key passages from the prison-writings and, in 1957, published them along with a brief commentary in a slim volume titled *The Open Marxism of Antonio Gramsci*. The title was obviously intended as a provocation aimed simultaneously at two opposing camps – a provocation made even more explicit in Marzani's introductory remarks: 'To speak of Gramsci as a Marxist with an open mind may strike many people as a contradiction in terms, because the behavior of a considerable number of Marxists has bolstered ruling class propaganda that Marxism is a dogma. Marxism is not a dogma though there are Marxists who are dogmatists'. Just one year after the Soviet invasion of Hungary and the violent suppression of widespread dissent in Poland, Marzani was proposing something utterly incredible to the overwhelming majority of the American population, for whom communism, Marxism, totalitarianism, and even socialism were (and, for the most part, remain) indistinguishable. At the same time, Marzani was issuing an invitation to those on the other side of the political divide – that is, the CPUSA and its sympathisers who steadfastly adhered to their Marxist convictions even in the face of McCarthyism (of which Marzani was himself a victim) – to free themselves from their rigid orthodoxies and ossified doctrines. Marzani's appeal had no discernible effect.

Carlos Nelson Coutinho, a professor of political philosophy at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro with a long history of active political engagement in Brazil, studied Gramsci and wrote extensively about him in circumstances quite different from those of most European and US left intellectuals

and political activists. Latin America has its own Gramscian tradition that dates back to the early 1950s, when a group of young Argentine communists guided by their mentor, Héctor Agosti, embarked on the ambitious project of translating from the Italian the thematic edition of the *Prison Notebooks*. It was brought out between 1958 and 1962 by Editorial Lautaro, the publishing-house of the Communist Party of Argentina, which had already published a translation of the *Prison Letters* in 1950. Several members of the group – among them José Aricó and Juan Carlos Portantiero, who would later write important and influential books on Gramsci – became leading proponents of a radical renewal of the Left and increasingly critical of the Communist Party official doctrine. They published important essays in the journal *Pasado y presente* that manifested a strong affinity with Gramscian thought. Their initial political impact was rather limited, but the translation of the prison-writings was a significant step in the dissemination of Gramsci in Latin America. A Portuguese translation of the *Prison Letters* was published in 1966 by Civilização Brasileira, followed two years later by three volumes from the *Prison Notebooks* – two of them edited and translated by Coutinho. In Europe (excepting Italy) and North America, little was known about the most original aspects of Gramsci's thought until the mid-1970s, when substantial and reliable translations of his writings started to become available. Even then, the impact of Gramsci's ideas did not extend very far beyond academia and relatively small circles of leftist political activists. Around the same time, many politically-engaged Latin-American left intellectuals were driven into exile by dictatorial régimes. For them, Gramsci's relevance had an existential dimension. Like him, they had to confront catastrophic defeat, and from his writings they derived a way of articulating the relationship between socialism and democracy. Coutinho was one of the significant active participants in this process, which is why his observations on a radical conceptualisation of democracy and on 'Gramsci and Brazil' in this volume are of particular interest.

There are many other elements of this work that readers, including Gramscian experts, will find original and stimulating. One of them is his view on the geographical universality of Gramsci. Another is his discussion of Gramsci's concept of hegemony in relation to Rousseau's and Hegel's socio-political theories. The pages devoted to a comparison of Gramsci's and Georg Lukács's definition of ideology offer fresh insights; and the same is true of Coutinho's reflections on Gramsci's concept of passive revolution.

Carlos Nelson Coutinho is one of the most prominent intellectuals of the Brazilian Left. His scholarly work and political writings have also appeared in a variety of Italian and Spanish-language publications and are well known in Latin America. He is a household name among Gramsci scholars, not only for

his critical and theoretical work but also for his philological contributions to the field. His new six-volume critical edition of the *Prison Notebooks* and two-volume edition of the *Prison Letters* (all of them prepared with the assistance of Luiz Sérgio Henriques and Marco Aurélio Nogueira), published between 1999 and 2005, are an invaluable resource to anyone engaged in detailed study of Gramsci's texts. The Latin-American perspective that Coutinho brings to the interpretation of Gramsci, combined with his minute knowledge of the primary texts, and his expertise in modern political philosophy give this book its special quality. The publication of this volume is also the best possible way for anglophone readers to become acquainted, at long last, with an unusually stimulating and provocative political thinker and activist.

Joseph A. Buttigieg

Preface

This book on the thought of Antonio Gramsci aims to investigate the decisive points in the formation and systematisation of his political theory. After examining Gramsci's formative years (1910–26), in which he gradually absorbed the essential elements of Marx's and Lenin's heritage, I propose a discussion of the main methodological questions presented by Gramsci's great mature work – the *Prison Notebooks* – where I indicate the themes by which I think he establishes a relationship with Marx and Lenin, not of mere continuity, but of true dialectical preservation and renewal. In the last chapter and in the third of the appendices, I try to demonstrate the universality of Gramsci's ideas, discussing not only his influence on current Marxist thinking, but also, and most importantly, the operational validity of many of his categories to a deeper analysis of Brazilian reality. The other two appendices complete and reinforce themes discussed in previous chapters. The first highlights Gramsci's creative dialogue with modern political philosophy (particularly with Rousseau and Hegel), while the second explores the possibility of applying Gramsci's category of passive revolution to the understanding of what has been called the neoliberal era.

Having focused on political theory, I was forced to leave out, or to address only incidentally, many important aspects of Gramsci's thought, such as his analyses of the links between literature and society, the concept of national-popular culture, his many observations on education, and so on. This approach, however, seems to me justified by the very internal structure of Gramsci's work: in Chapter Four, I will try to show that politics is the starting-point from which Gramsci analyses social life as a whole, the questions of art and culture, of philosophy, of pedagogy and beyond. Furthermore, I think it is in the sphere of political theory – or, in a broader sense, in the creation of a Marxist ontology of political praxis – that Gramsci's essential contribution to the renewal of Marxism, and of political philosophy in general, lies.

I agree with Umberto Cerroni when he says,

Upon careful consideration of the dramatic evolution of socialism's political theory on the twentieth century, one has to admit that only with Antonio

Gramsci did this theory achieve a sufficiently articulated formulation and was able to compete with official political theory.³

It would be false, however, to conclude from this legitimate historical observation that there can be found in Gramsci's work precise and complete indications about all theoretical problems faced today by the socialist movement inspired by Marxism. For that reason, I will try to mention in this book, even if only briefly, the instances in which Gramsci's thought was realised – preserved, but also brought to a higher level – not only in the theoretical works of his more direct heirs, the Italian Marxists, among which Palmiro Togliatti and Pietro Ingrao stand out, but also in the late work of Nicos Poulantzas.

The acknowledgement of the centrality of Gramsci to the elaboration of Marxism must not, therefore, result in any sort of new and dangerous dogmatic canonisation. There is no such thing as 'Gramscianism', just as there is no such thing as 'Leninism', to the extent that these two terms should not refer to a collection of fixed and immutable dogmas, obtained through the decontextualisation and, consequently, the de-historicisation of statements made by the two revolutionary thinkers. As early as 1923, Lukács said, 'in matters of Marxism, orthodoxy refers exclusively to method.'⁴ This observation, I think, is just as valid for Gramsci; and that is why the present work attributes particular significance to the methodology contained in the *Prison Notebooks*. However, this should not mean a denial of the extraordinary fecundity of many of the categories created by Gramsci when employing his method. These categories possess an analytical power that transcends their time and place, as I try to demonstrate when analysing the case of Brazil. I hope this book, in spite of its holes and gaps, may contribute to rendering more evident the novelty of Gramsci's categories to Marxist thought, and also to highlighting the current relevance of his theoretical and political legacy.

3. Cerroni 1973, p. 151.

4. Lukács 1971, p. 8.

Chapter One

Youth, a Contradictory Formation: 1910–18

1.1. Sardinia

The intellectual and political formation of Antonio Gramsci does not begin in 1914, the year in which, as a university-student in Turin (where he had been living since 1911), he joined a youth-organisation associated with the Italian Socialist Party. Born in 1891 in Sardinia, one of the poorest regions in Italy, Gramsci experienced from childhood the hardship of life in the lower strata of Italian society. Even though he had passed brilliantly the admission-exams for the *ginnasio* (high school) in 1903, Gramsci was prevented from continuing his studies by the poor conditions of his family at the time. He was forced to work for two years, in spite of his physical handicap – a disease that afflicted him when he was 18 months-old left him a hunchback – in a state-register-office in Ghilarza, where he spent 10 hours a day carrying legal folders at times heavier than himself. Years later, he would recall the injustice he had to suffer: being the best student in class, he was unable to continue attending school, unlike the bad students, who benefited from belonging to the wealthiest families in the region.¹

Finally, thanks to the efforts of his mother and his sisters, Gramsci returned to school and finished his *ginnasio* studies, while living in very precarious

1. The biographical information contained here and elsewhere in this book comes mostly from Fiori 1966.

conditions at the home of a peasant in Santu Lussurgiu, 15 kilometres away from Ghilarza, where his family was living. His first contact with the socialist press dates from this period: his elder brother Gennaro, who had emigrated to Turin, regularly sent him *Avanti!*, the main organ of the Italian Socialist Party (PSI). In order to continue his education, Gramsci went to Cagliari, the capital of Sardinia, where he lived with Gennaro, who had returned from Turin and become treasurer of the *Camera del Lavoro* (a sort of union-coordination at the city-level). Gramsci went to meetings of the local socialist movement, which at the time had strong regionalist and Sardinian-autonomist tendencies. A school essay on the theme 'The Oppressed and the Oppressors', probably dating from 1910, bears the marks of the young Sardinian's first socialist education. After stating that wars and conquests are still part of the everyday life of men, and that the Sardinian people are oppressed by the northern Italians, Gramsci ends with prophetic tones:

The French Revolution abolished many privileges, and raised up many of the oppressed; but all it did was replace one class in power by another. Yet it did teach us one great lesson: social privileges and differences, being products of society and not of nature, can be overcome. Humanity will need another bloodbath to abolish many of these injustices – and then it will be for the rulers to be sorry they left the masses in that state of ignorance and savagery they enjoy today.²

Throughout this period, he developed an intense regionalist feeling, allied with a deep revolt against social inequality. *Unione Sarda*, the autonomist paper of Cagliari, published his first piece in 1910. Then, in Turin – thanks to a scholarship won in a contest, he could attend the university there, with the intention of obtaining a degree in Linguistics – Gramsci joined the 'Group for Anti-Protectionist Action and Propaganda', which brought together southern intellectuals; he also became a frequent reader of *L'Unità*, directed by Gaetano Salvemini, a southern socialist whose main goal was the fight against the protectionist policy then-enforced by the Giovanni Giolitti administration (1903–13), a policy that had the tacit support of the reformist parliamentary group of the PSI. Salvemini was convinced – Gramsci would come to adopt and develop the same conviction in the following years – that protectionism was an instrument for the formation of a conservative group uniting northern businessmen and the owners of large estates in the South, which mostly harmed the southern peasants. Protectionist measures, allowing for huge profit-margins for northern businessmen, favoured the granting of small

2. Gramsci 1967, p. 5; 1990a, p. 5.

concessions to certain sectors of the workforce, a policy used by Giolitti and supported by the reformists. Gramsci became a defender of free trade, which he thought was a means not only to help develop the productive forces of the South, but also to break the reformist attempt to integrate the northern proletariat (or its upper layer) into the ruling bloc.³ Gramsci's 'Sardinism' was thus one of the main pillars of the anti-capitalism of his youth; but, at the same time, it was also one of the sources of his aversion to the reformist political and ideological conceptions very much alive inside the PSI at the time.

1.2. The encounter with Croce and Gentile

There is, however, another factor, maybe even more decisive to the formation of the young Gramsci. As he entered university, he came into contact with the idealist cultural movement, headed mainly by Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile, two neo-Hegelian philosophers radically opposed to the positivist tradition that prevailed in the cultural milieu of northern Italy by the end of the nineteenth century. (The cultural hegemony of positivism resulted from the scientific mentality connected to the rapid industrial development of that Italian region.) Opposing vulgar evolutionism and empiricist and positivist scientism, Croce and Gentile preached the value of philosophical and humanistic culture; they defended the value of spirit, will and action as against the veneration of 'facts'.

Today, looking back over such a long period of time, it is not difficult to clearly grasp the problematic and even anti-progressive and restorative character of Italian neo-Hegelianism, which, like its German brother,⁴ was much more a return to the abstract moralism of Kant and Fichte, with a strong irrationalist streak, than an actual resumption of Hegel's dialectical and concrete historicism. Thus, Francesco Valentini very appropriately calls the revival of idealism in Italy 'the counter-reformation of dialectics', remarking that it

3. On the anti-protectionist stance of the young Gramsci, see Bergami 1977, pp. 33–50. Describing this period in Italian history, Togliatti observed in 1950: 'National economy as a whole rests on a system of tariffs harmful to workers, peasants and the middle-classes, and favourable only to privileged groups from whose bosom issues the ever stronger plutocracy protected by the state' (Togliatti 1974c, p. 104). The young Gramsci's anti-protectionist stance led Domenico Losurdo to propose the hypothesis that 'Gramsci begins as a liberal, in a certain way' (Losurdo 1997, p. 25 ff.). On this specific point, I think Losurdo's great book oversimplifies the complex and contradictory character of Gramsci's early development.

4. G. Lukács provides an excellent analysis of German neo-Hegelianism (Lukács 1980, Chapter Five).

is part of a movement for cultural restoration that follows ideologically the romantic reaction. The anti-positivist polemics for the sake of 'the dignity of the spirit' were part of political concerns that had their source in the great fear provoked by the Paris Commune and by the growth of the socialist movement... This led to the abandonment of certain conquests of Hegelian philosophy and, in essence, to the abandonment of the results of the anti-subjectivist polemics, therefore inflicting deep wounds on historicism itself.⁵

Thus it is not by chance that Croce, after the initial period in which he presents himself (without having ever been a Marxist) as the spokesman for the revisionism of Bernstein and Sorel in Italy, later converts himself into an anti-democratic and profoundly anti-communist liberal; it is also not by chance that Gentile, after an interesting attempt in his youth to present Marxism as a 'philosophy of praxis', adhered fully to Fascism, becoming one of the main ideologues of the Mussolini régime and serving as its Minister of Education for many years.

These problematic elements were already part of Italian neo-idealism when the young Gramsci was influenced by it (even though only later would the movement reveal its clearly restorative nature). However, what stands out, at least in Gramsci's 'reading', is the element of liberation, the element that highlights the roles of will and action in the transformation of reality, the refusal of the fetishism of 'facts' and scientific myths, which led to a vulgar and fatalist determinism. This vulgar determinism had become, for the most part, the official ideology of Italian socialism. The PSI, because of its late foundation in 1892, combined the cult of scientism that prevailed in the progressive bourgeois culture of northern Italy with the strictly economic and evolutionist interpretation of Marxism that dominated the Second International and particularly the German Social-Democratic Party, which had rapidly become the guiding party for Italian socialists.

Within this framework, the celebrated philosophical writings of Marxist Antonio Labriola (1843–1904) had a unique destiny: they had a strong influence on the formulations of the young Croce and Gentile, but they were little discussed among the socialists. Having retired from the PSI's practical action (the eclecticism of doctrines in the Party repelled him) and thus accused of being a dilettante, Labriola was unable to destroy the massive preponderance within the PSI of vulgar-Kautskyan evolutionism, even though his writings revealed an original conception of Marxism, very much alert to Marx and Engels's Hegelian and dialectical legacy. On the other hand, even if his

5. Valentini 1966, p. 8.

theoretical stance was against the ideology prevalent within the PSI, his political statements – let us recall, for instance, his defence of Italian colonial action in Libya – put him within the context of the Second International. This created barriers to the acceptance of his ideas by the more radical socialists, who looked for a new path during the First World-War. At any rate, even though many of Gramsci's philosophical ideas had come to him through Croce and Gentile, the *direct* influence of Labriola on the formation of the young Sardinian socialist was apparently not very great.⁶

Therefore, a positivist and evolutionist conception of Marxism prevailed among the Italian socialist leaders, a conception that served perfectly to justify the immobilist and fatalist practice that prevailed in most of the currents into which the PSI was divided. Just like Kautsky, the great *maître à penser* of the Second International, the main ideologues of the PSI understood the proletarian revolution as the result of an inescapable law of economic development: the progress of productive forces would aggravate class-polarisation and lead to catastrophic crises, which would lead, at some point, to the collapse of capitalism as a consequence of proletarian insurrection. Meanwhile, the proletariat was supposed to strengthen their organisations as much as possible and wait for the 'great day'. Doctrinal inflexibility went side-by-side with an objectively passive stance, an immobilist position of expectation. Marxism was considered a defence of facts against will, of 'natural' objectivity against creative subjectivity.

In 1892, the year the PSI was founded, Filippo Turati, who later became the leader of the reformist group, stated:

A lot depends on things, on the environment, on circumstances; little, in spite of the illusion, comes from having a purpose and willing it. Facts *determine* ideas and subvert predictions.

The complex dialectic of causality and teleology (or of determinism and freedom) that lies at the heart of Marx's ontology of social being was completely abandoned. It was not by chance that Turati, in full agreement with Kautsky, proposed a synthesis of Marxism and Darwinism, a basis for the affirmation of a vulgar and fatalist evolutionism:

Marx is, precisely, the Darwin of social science.... One could say that his is the doctrine of the transformation of historical species, attached to the biological transformation of the Darwinists.

6. This influence certainly became stronger by the time the *Notebooks* were written. For a general view of Labriola's work, see Gerratana 1979, pp. 622–57.

Moreover, in the case of Turati, fatalism appeared as a conspicuous ideological cover for reformist practices:

The two nuclei [the proletariat and the bourgeoisie] form and their antagonism is simplified at the same time it is aggravated. At the end of this process, we have the social revolution. We do not fear the economic and political reforms, because the basis of our doctrine is an optimistic conception. We think the river *necessarily* runs to the sea.⁷

Things were not different among the representatives of the 'maximalist' group (they got the name for defending the 'maximum-programme'), nominally opposed to reformism, who had conquered the leadership of the PSI in 1912. Giacinto Menotti Serrati, their main leader, revealed a conception of Marxism similar to Turati's when he stated, in 1919:

We base our whole maximalist conception on the Marxist doctrine and on its strictest (I would say almost sectarian) interpretation. We refuse voluntarism, anarchism and reformism. We, Marxists, *interpret History, we do not make it*, we move in time according to the logic of facts and things. Industrialism, trustism, imperialism, and war: these are the bourgeois facts that mature the coming of socialism.⁸

The common fatalist and positivist interpretation of Marxism conditioned the answer, different only in appearance, given by reformists and maximalists to the question posed by the struggle for socialism. On the one hand, the maximalists limited themselves to passively waiting for the 'great day' that would 'naturally' be brought about by the evolution of capitalism. In the meantime, the issue was to avoid any compromise with the current order, directing all forces to radical and intransigent propaganda. In reality, all that this attitude ever achieved was a combination of verbal radicalism and practical impotence. On the other hand, the reformists – who did not see that the fight for reforms is not an unambiguous movement, but a dynamic space of alternatives, where the balance of forces can be altered in favour of either the proletariat or the bourgeoisie – limited themselves to supporting the meek reforms proposed by the ruling classes, in the naïve conviction that, eventually, 'the river would run to the sea' (Turati), that is, socialism would come as if by way of a miracle. As such, confusing the reforms themselves with socialism, the movement with the final goal, something Bernstein was already doing, was just a step away: a step soon explicitly taken by Turati. The gap between tactics and strategy – the inability to articulate the final goal

7. All three quotations are from Marramao 1971, pp. 13, 30 and 43.

8. Cited in Santarelli 1977, p. 221.

together with concrete struggle in the immediate – was reflected in the false dilemma of ‘reform *or* revolution’, in the opposition/complementariness of reformist ‘tailism’ and maximalist passivity. Since, in practice, reformists took action and maximalists restricted themselves to agitation and propaganda, the former, even when they were a minority, were the true leaders of the party, its hegemonic tendency.

1.3. Gramsci turns away from the Marxism of the Second International

Ever since he joined the PSI, Gramsci did not feel comfortable in an environment dominated by such false dualism. He certainly empathised with the maximalists’ radicalism, but he did not accept their passivity, nor their empty speeches. If the anti-protectionist ‘Meridionalism’ of the young Sardinian had prepared him to refuse reformism, that is, a policy centred on the corporate interests of a small northern labour-aristocracy, his knowledge of idealism – the assimilation of Croce and Gentile’s neo-Hegelianism – helped him to reveal and overcome the fatalist positivism that lies at the foundation of maximalist immobilism.

The main elements of the young Gramsci’s idealist heritage were two famous essays, published in 1899, in which Gentile presented his interpretation of Marx.⁹ Based on a reading of the *Theses on Feuerbach*, Gentile attempted to demonstrate that, contrary to the interpretation defended by Croce,¹⁰ the essential element in Marx’s thought is not the economic determinism defended by the theoreticians of the Second International (including Engels himself, according to Gentile), but a ‘philosophy of praxis’: the idea that it is not the economy, but human praxis, subjective will, that is the real driving force of history. Certainly, Gentile’s ‘reading’ – which emphasised exclusively the moment of will and subjectivity – ends up reducing praxis to a moral act, obliterating the complex articulation between objectivity and subjectivity, nature and history, teleology and causality, an articulation that, according to Marx, is present in economic labour (in the ‘metabolism of man and nature’),

9. The two essays, ‘Una critica del materialismo storico’ and ‘La filosofia della prassi’, were published for the first time in 1899. They can be found in Gentile 1974, pp. 13–165. Regarding Gentile’s influence on the Italian Marxism of his time, see Racinaro 1978, pp. 29–70.

10. The ‘revisionist’ interpretation of Marxism by Croce – which not only rejects historical materialism, but also implies the ‘overcoming’ of Marx’s law of value by marginalist arguments – can be found in the collection of his essays in Croce 1973. For the Croce-Gentile controversy on the interpretation of Marx, see ‘Dal carteggio Gentile-Croce’, in Gentile 1974, pp. 171–266.

and, as a consequence, in the higher forms of praxis, which have in labour their cell and their model. Therefore, it is possible to say that the 'philosophy of praxis' that Gentile ascribes to Marx is closer to the subjective idealism of Fichte and its abstract dialectics of the Ego and the non-Ego, than to the materialist dialectics of the author of *Das Kapital*. Nevertheless, his approach drew attention to a decisive aspect of Marxian thought – namely, the centrality of praxis for the construction of social being – which had been entirely neglected by the Marxism of the Second International.¹¹ Gentile anticipates, in a certain way, a 'reading' of Marxism that found its greatest examples in 1923, in Karl Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy* and Georg Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*. (Now is not the time to show how Lukács's work, even if containing idealist elements, is far more profound and concrete than Gentile's.)

There are traces of Gentile's interpretation of Marx in all of Gramsci's work from that period.¹² Thus, in a piece from 1914, Gramsci writes: 'Revolutionaries see history as a product of their own spirit.'¹³ In April 1917, celebrating the events in Russia, he does not hesitate to see in the proletarian revolution the realisation of the Kantian categorical imperative:

This is the most majestic phenomenon that human history has ever produced. As a result of the Russian Revolution the man who was a *common criminal* has turned into the sort of man whom Immanuel Kant, the theoretician of absolute ethical conduct, had called for – the sort of man who says: the immensity of the heavens above me, the imperative of my conscience within me. What these brief news items reveal to us is a liberation of spirit...¹⁴

Gramsci sees in the action of the Bolsheviks, with whom he immediately sympathises, the full realisation of his radically anti-positivist and anti-evolutionist view of Marxism, but he does not exempt it from strong traits of subjective idealism and voluntarism:

He [Lenin] and his Bolshevik comrades are convinced that socialism can be achieved at any time. They are nourished on Marxist thought. They are revolutionaries, not evolutionists. And revolutionary thought does not see time as a progressive factor. It denies that all intermediate stages between the conception of socialism and its achievement must have absolute and

11. This was also Lenin's opinion. Suggesting Gentile's book in a bibliography on Marx in 1914, he noted: 'The author mentions some important aspects of Marx's materialist dialectics, which usually elude the attention of Kantians, Positivists etc.' Lenin 1960, p. 83.

12. On the relationship of the young Gramsci and Gentile, see Paggi 1970, pp. 18–23; Bergami 1977, pp. 100–7; and, above all, Sbarberi 1986, p. 17 ff.

13. Gramsci 1980, p. 11; 1990a, p. 7.

14. Gramsci 1982, p. 141; 1990a, p. 30.

complete confirmation in time and place. It holds that it is enough that these stages be realised in thought for the revolution to be able to proceed beyond them.¹⁵

This mixture of anti-positivism and voluntarism, the distinctive trait of the young Gramsci's Marxism, finds its 'classic' expression in the famous article 'The Revolution against *Das Kapital*': in showing that human will, 'moulder of objective reality', is the real driving force of history, the Bolsheviks had overcome economism, for

they live Marxist thought – that thought which is eternal, which represents the continuation of German and Italian idealism, and which in the case of Marx was contaminated by positivist and naturalist encrustations.¹⁶

In the socialist activity developed by Gramsci up until the October Revolution, his work on culture and education, on the struggle to prepare the subjective conditions of revolutionary praxis, occupies a place of exceptional significance. Gramsci was convinced, as he said in 1916, that

every revolution has been preceded by an intense labour of criticism, by the diffusion of culture and the spread of ideas amongst masses of men who are at first resistant, and think only of solving, day by day, hour by hour, their own immediate economic and political problems for themselves, without ties of solidarity with the others who find themselves in the same conditions.¹⁷

For the young Gramsci, cultural struggle and organised ideological preparation seem to be privileged means of breaking with the false alternative between innocuous reformism and empty maximalism. As we can grasp from the last quotation, culture appears to him as a privileged means of overcoming individualism, to awaken in men their universal consciousness. Still, for the young Gramsci, the battle of ideas is connected to a broad and integral conception of socialism. In 1917, he wrote that,

It is not the task of the Socialists to substitute one order for another. They must establish an order where there was none. The highest law that they want to translate into practice is: 'that all citizens should be able to develop their own, human personality to the full'.¹⁸

15. Gramsci 1982, p. 266; 1990a, p. 32.

16. Gramsci 1982, p. 514; 1990a, p. 34.

17. Gramsci 1980, p. 101; 1990a, p. 12.

18. Gramsci 1982, p. 11.

In the same year, when proposing the creation of a Socialist Cultural Association, which, he thought, would complete the front of the workers' struggle (which, if restricted to economic and political battles, becomes one-sided), he said: 'Socialism is a whole vision of life: it has its own philosophy, its own faith, its own morality.'¹⁹ It is interesting to note that both Serrati, the leader of the maximalists, and Amadeo Bordiga, who would later collaborate with Gramsci in the foundation of the Communist Party, fiercely attacked the Gramscian project of founding socialist cultural associations, dismissing it as an idealist project and a waste of time.

Gramsci, however, did not give up and, with the help of a few friends, in 1917 founded, outside the PSI, the 'Club of Moral Life', an association for the promotion of intellectual debates that would provide a moral and cultural education to young socialists. The debates, with Gramsci's orientation, almost always aimed at developing the moral personality of the club-members, helping them to overcome individualism and to acquire an awareness of the value of human solidarity. Gramsci considered the development of personality as an ethical foundation of the integral socialism he wanted to create. In a letter asking advice from the pedagogue Giuseppe Lombardo-Radice (a Gentilian), Gramsci indicates that he conceives the 'Club of Moral Life' as a practical alternative to the verbalism of the maximalists:

We in Turin believe that it is not enough just to exhort people in words to adopt the principles and moral maxims which must necessarily accompany the advent of the new socialist civilisation. We have attempted to organise this exhortation and, in doing so, to provide new (for Italy) models of association.²⁰

In the 'Club of Moral Life' experience, Gramsci simultaneously revealed the strengths and weaknesses of the conception of socialism he held at the time: on the one hand, he still saw the foundations of socialist education and praxis in an idealistic, moralistic light (we need only recall that one of the main texts discussed in the 'Club' were the moral maxims of the Roman Stoic Marcus Aurelius); on the other hand, however, it reveals a just concern with the cultural elements which are part of the fight for socialism, which does not come to a close with political and economic transformations. Socialism is also the creation of a new culture, without which it will not be possible for its

19. Gramsci 1982, p. 499. Such a 'mythical' concept of revolution, drawn primarily from Georges Sorel, reappears in Mariátegui 1967. The Peruvian Mariátegui had his Marxist education in Italy between 1920 and 1922, amidst a cultural climate still very close to that of the formation of the young Gramsci.

20. Gramsci 1992a, p. 92. With regard to the 'Club of Moral Life', see Bergami 1977, p. 121 ff.

potential to be fully realised: this is an idea Gramsci would never abandon, as we can see in his prison-writings about the importance of 'moral and intellectual reform', of the struggle for hegemony. Besides, the idea that verbal preaching is not enough, that it is necessary to start building the bases of socialism even before power is taken – an idea that will become more concrete at the time of *L'Ordine Nuovo*, as we will see – indicates Gramsci's objective break with maximalist impotence and the postponement of any concrete measures until after the revolution, even though he was still formally connected, at the time, to the maximalist group inside the PSI.

Now we may advance a few key points for a general retrospective view. The formation of the young Gramsci had the merit of freeing him from the positivistic and fatalistic dilemmas that paralysed the PSI at the time; of preparing him for a richer and more articulated conception of socialism (which was also conceived as the creation of a new culture and of a new man); of avoiding adoption of the mechanistic ideology of the Second International;²¹ and of helping him understand the universal dimension of Lenin and the Soviet Revolution. But it also had – hence its contradictory nature – negative aspects, some of which, certainly undermined or partially corrected, continued to manifest themselves even in the prison-writings. I am referring above all to the fact that the markedly idealist character of his formation distanced Gramsci from a more detailed analysis of the economic transformations of his time: the Marxism of his youth proved to be impervious to a deep understanding of the economic moment, and, more generally, of the moment of causality, of determinism, so that he might carry out an effectively dialectical analysis of social being. Moral intransigence, on the other hand, blinded him, at this point in his evolution, to the necessary mediations demanded by political action; the just fight against reformism made him take an 'all or nothing' stance that, at times, brought him dangerously close to the maximalist passivity he criticised. In one July 1916 article, he said:

All or nothing, we used to say. And the war proved us right. All or nothing must be our programme for tomorrow. A strike of the club, not a patient and methodical weakening. The irresistible phalanx, not a fight put up by moles in fetid trenches.²²

21. This is one of the many points on which the ideological formation of the young Gramsci and that of Lukács are similar. Lukács himself, in a 1967 interview, considered it positive to have been influenced by bourgeois sociologists such as Simmel and Max Weber, and not by the ideology of the Second International: 'I am not unhappy that I learned the first elements of social science with Simmel and Max Weber, and not with Kautsky.' Holz, Kofler and Abendroth 1980, p. 100.

22. Gramsci 1980, p. 433.

If we recall his mature conception of the 'war of position', of the need for a long struggle to conquer the trenches of civil society, we will see how distant the Gramsci of the *Notebooks* is from the Gramsci of 1916.

But we need not wait for the *Notebooks* to observe evolutionary processes in the conceptions of the Sardinian socialist. Under the influence of the Russian Revolution, of a knowledge that was of a still-precarious (but already effective) knowledge of the writings of Lenin and other Bolsheviks, Gramsci begins – as early as 1918 – to approach concrete reality more closely, to analyse more intimately the mediations of the real, to imagine the intermediate tasks necessary for achieving the final goal. A greater understanding of partial conquests takes the place of 'all or nothing'. Gramsci writes in November 1918 that,

The political struggle is once again taking place in an atmosphere of relative freedom – an indispensable condition if citizens are to be able to know the truth; to assemble; to discuss economic and political problems and programmes; to join forces, once they have identified their own aims and consciousness with a social consciousness and set of aims organised in the party.²³

The path to a new and higher phase in Gramsci's formation was opened up: the phase in which, together with his comrades from the weekly *L'Ordine Nuovo*, he sets the goal 'of translating Lenin into Italian', that is, to concretely analyse the national reality of his country to find in it the elements that would allow for the creation of a proletarian state, in the style of the soviets.

23. Gramsci 1984, p. 415; 1990a, p. 56.

Chapter Two

Workers' Democracy and Factory-Councils: 1919–20

2.1. *L'Ordine Nuovo*

In April 1919, together with Angelo Tasca, Palmiro Togliatti and Umberto Terracini, Gramsci published in Turin *L'Ordine Nuovo*, a 'weekly commentary on socialist culture'. At first, the goal of the review did not stray much from Gramsci's old concerns: having an organ that would serve as a centre for the creation and propagation of socialist culture, for the ideological preparation that, as we have seen, he considered an essential element in the struggle to create the conditions for socialist transformation. However, given the new historical framework opened up by the October Revolution, the 'cultural' project became more comprehensive and more concrete. The Soviet Revolution had in practice revealed to Gramsci something that he had been claiming in theory: the revolutionary will, the initiative of a collected organised subject, is able to bring socialist proposals to triumph even where objective conditions (as seen from a strictly economic perspective) seem to be not-yet 'mature' for transformation. With the Soviet Revolution and, more broadly, with the end of the First World-War, the issue of socialism became a priority all over Europe. Everything seemed to indicate that the era of world-revolution had begun. The Italian Socialist Party, which had benefited from a neutral position during the conflict (an attitude that, even though determined for the

most part by maximalist passivity, had avoided the adoption of the social-patriotic views that had led to the collapse of the main parties of the Second International), emerged from the War in a strong position. The Party had taken part in the conferences of the 'internationalist Left' in Switzerland, which had been supported by Lenin, and presented its candidacy for a place in the Third International, which was being founded at the time. Serrati, then-leader of the maximalist group, which represented the majority of the Party, even went to the meetings of the new International.

For the young socialists who had founded *L'Ordine Nuovo*, there was a pressing need to 'act politically'. In issue seven, dated 27 July 1919, the initial culturalist position was altered. Gramsci and Togliatti, with Terracini's support, promoted against Tasca what Gramsci would later call 'an editorial *coup d'état*': in the piece 'Workers' Democracy',¹ it is stated clearly that actual political action should be substituted for the battle of ideas. To act politically becomes, within the framework of an apparently imminent world-revolution, synonymous with 'doing as in Russia', that is, to elaborate both the theory and the practice of the soviet (or council) evolving in Italy. For the *L'Ordine Nuovo* group, solidarity with the Communist International did not mean a merely formal and rhetorical solidarity, as it did for the PSI: 'doing as in Russia', preparing the conditions for socialist revolution in their own country, was the concrete way of showing a practical and essential agreement with the Communist International and with the teachings of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, several translations of which *L'Ordine Nuovo* began to publish in Italy.²

But let us see how Gramsci himself, in an article from August 1920, explains the weekly's intentions after the 'turn' in the seventh edition. The review posed itself the following question:

Is there any working-class institution in Italy that can be compared to the Soviet, that shares some of its characteristics? ... Something that would allow us to say: the Soviet is a universal form, not a Russian, and only a Russian, institution; wherever there exist proletarians struggling to win for themselves industrial autonomy, the Soviet is the form in which the working class manifests this determination to emancipate itself; the Soviet is the form of self-government of the working masses. Is there any germ, a vague hope or hint of such Soviet-style self-government in Italy, in Turin? ... Yes, a germ of a workers' government, of a Soviet, does exist in Italy, in Turin –

1. Gramsci 1987, pp. 87–91; 1999a, pp. 65–8.

2. As early as February 1919, before the foundation of *L'Ordine Nuovo*, Gramsci already proved that he had learned an essential Leninist lesson: 'The concrete problem can only be resolved within the state; therefore, no one is "concrete" without a general conception of the essence and the limits of the state' (Gramsci 1984, p. 520).

it is the internal commission. Let us study this working-class institution; let us inquire into it. And let us study the capitalist factory as well, but not as an organization to produce materials, for we don't have the specialist knowledge that would be needed. Let us study the capitalist factory as a necessary form of the working class, as a political organ, as the 'national territory' of workers' self-government.³

Attached to a narrow concept of the 'cultural' functions of the review, and a lot less willing to break with the traditional formulations of both the PSI and the unions, Tasca rejected the proposal. Gramsci said that, by culture, 'he [Tasca] meant "recollection", not "thought" – and recollection of the discarded, useless junk of working-class thought.'⁴ The young Sardinian, on the contrary, took culture to mean a way of thinking about concrete reality, of intervening in its transformation. This is why, after the 'editorial coup' of issue seven, 'the problem of the development of the internal commission became the central problem, the *idea*, of *L'Ordine Nuovo*.'⁵

Even though they had emerged only timidly in 1906, the internal commissions were never easily accepted by the factory-owners; only after the end of the First World-War, in 1919, did the Industrialists' Association agree with the Federation of Metalworkers to accept the commissions, that is, to explicitly acknowledge the right of the workers to have representation within the factory itself. The internal commissions, according to the agreement, had as their main purpose to secure and to safeguard workers' rights in the workplace (to have access to production-bonuses, suitable working conditions and so on). The leaders of the commission should be elected by the unionised workers; these were therefore delegates of the craft-unions within the factory, since they were directly nominated by the union-leadership.⁶ To use a term that would only later become fashionable, the commission, which had little autonomy, was nothing more than a 'transmission-belt' of the union. This is precisely what Gramsci and his friends wanted to change. First and foremost, it was a matter of making the internal commission a body that represented *all* factory-workers, including technicians and engineers: therefore, everyone should be able to vote and to receive votes, independently of being unionised or not. Secondly, Gramsci intended the organisation of the internal commission to be divided into teams, firstly bringing together the workers in a given section, whose representatives would join the workers in other sections of the plant to form a general directing committee. This, Gramsci believe, would

3. Gramsci 1987, pp. 619–620; 1990a, pp. 291–2.

4. Ibid.

5. Gramsci 1987, p. 622; 1990a, p. 293.

6. Spriano 1971, p. 47 ff.

transform the organisation into an expression of the 'collective worker' and would adhere more directly and immediately to the production-process, enabling it to control and manage it. Once these changes were achieved, the internal commission would become the factory-council.

These changes in the working régime aimed to promote an essential change of *function*: the factory-councils are no longer seen as instruments for defending the worker's immediate rights, but as the means to *lift the worker from the condition of a wage-earner to that of a producer*. On this point, they were fundamentally different from trade-unions. To the extent that unions are an organisation adequate to the worker-as-wage-earner, that they are the instruments through which the workers negotiate better prices for the commodity of labour-power, they

are all types of proletarian organization specific to the period of history dominated by capital. It can be argued that they are in a sense an integral part of capitalist society, and have a function that is inherent in a regime of private property.⁷

The councils, in contrast, are the basis on which the worker can rise to the condition of *producer*:

The worker can see himself as a producer only if he sees himself as an inseparable part of the whole labour system which is concentrated in the object being manufactured, and only if he experiences the unity of the industrial process which in toto demands collaboration between manual workers, skilled workers, administrative employees, engineers and technical directors.⁸

The ability of the worker to see himself in this way, that is, as an integral part of the collective worker, is something secured by the organisation of the factory-council, according to Gramsci.

The councils, however, are destined for an even higher function. Starting from the idea that 'the socialist state already exists potentially in the institutions of social life characteristic of the exploited working class',⁹ Gramsci concludes that 'The factory-council is the model of the proletarian state. All the questions inherent to the organisation of the proletarian state are inherent to the organisation of the council.' This is why, he says, 'the proletarian dictatorship can only be embodied in a type of organisation that is specific to

7. Gramsci 1987, p. 237; 1990a, p. 99.

8. Gramsci 1987, p. 298; 1990a, p. 110.

9. Gramsci 1987, p. 87; 1990a, p. 65.

the activity of producers, not wage-earners, the slaves of capital. The factory-council is the nucleus of this organisation'.¹⁰

Gramsci also believes that the socialist state will be the result of the articulation of all factory-councils in a central executive council, which the peasants' councils will also join. (But his presentation is not very clear on this point: he still lacks, as we will see, a clear idea of how the working class will ally itself politically with other social groups.)

2.2. Gramsci and Bordiga

From the outset, the proposals of *L'Ordine Nuovo* were widely accepted by Turin's workers, and particularly by metalworkers. Factory-commissions in the form suggested by Gramsci were established in various companies; in October 1919, 50,000 workers, from about thirty companies, were already part of councils.¹¹ Soon came the negative reaction from the reformist unions and from the national executive of the PSI: the Metalworkers' Federation accused Gramsci and his friends of being 'revolutionary syndicalists', 'anarcho-syndicalists', and, above all, of trying to undermine the role and the action of traditional unions. Serrati was scandalised by the idea of granting the right to vote in the council-elections to non-unionised workers; to him, this would lead to the Party and the unions losing control of the new organs. A little later, Bordiga, who joined the *L'Ordine Nuovo* group in founding the PCd'I, expressed a profound disagreement with the Gramscian conception of the councils. To Bordiga, the proposals of *L'Ordine Nuovo* revealed

a return, pure and simple, to reformist gradualism; this, whether called reformism or unionism, is defined by the error of supposing that the proletariat is able to emancipate itself by winning ground on economic relations, while capitalism still possesses political power through the state.¹²

The main error of *L'Ordine Nuovo*, Bordiga thought, lay in the confusion of *factory-councils*, which are technical and economic organs for production-control (useful only *after* taking power, according to Bordiga), and *soviets*, which are organs of political representation.

Bordiga's views – even though one-sided, as we will see – present some valid questions for the analysis of the limitations of the Ordinovist experience.

10. Gramsci 1987, p. 238; 1990a, p. 100.

11. Spriano 1971, p. 54.

12. Bordiga 1973, p. 48.

It is true that, when Gramsci conceives of the factory as a 'national territory' of the working class, he falls victim, in a certain way, to a corporatist mistake: he cannot see that working-class political leadership and rule – which the creation of a socialist state depends on – are not limited to the immediate control of material *production*, assuming hegemony over the whole of *social relations* as well. This means that the 'territory' of the working class goes beyond the factory, encompassing all social, political and cultural institutions that enable the *reproduction* of social life as a whole (including the reproduction of economic production). In a certain way, the young Gramsci seems to believe that the control of the productive forces is enough in order to do without (or automatically determines) leadership and domination over social relations of production and reproduction. This essential gap in the Ordinovist conception – a gap Gramsci would acknowledge years later¹³ – also leads him to underestimate the role of the political party, of the party that organises the collective will of the working class as a privileged instrument of the political synthesis that makes it possible to achieve hegemony in that broader territory, which transcends the factory and which Gramsci later would call 'civil society'. Even the role of the unions appears excessively restricted: unions should not be limited – as Gramsci thought at the time – to negotiating better conditions for the sale of labour-power, but rather should play an active role in organising and unifying the working class, and serve as an important channel for them to intervene in setting the direction of national life as a whole. On the other hand, contrary to what Gramsci seemed to believe, the old role of unions does not disappear in socialism; they are still a valid institution for defending the workers against occasional bureaucratic distortions (as Lenin acknowledged in 1921, in his famous polemics with Trotsky) and for providing an autonomous channel for workers' participation in national life.

But these limitations of Gramsci's position in 1919–20 should not hide the unquestionably strong points in his formulations, which can and should be integrated with the ideas of his maturity. This is clear, first and foremost, regarding the importance Gramsci attributed to base-organisations in the creation of a socialist democracy, organisations which he called (with Marx and Lenin) 'the self-government of the working masses'. This leads him, in a position which was simultaneously correct and replete with future implications, to deny that the socialist state should be conceived as a party-dictatorship: he disapproved of 'the revolutionary myth that equates proletarian power with a dictatorship of the edifice of Socialist Party sections'.¹⁴ As a consequence,

13. Gramsci 1992, pp. 118–23; 1990b, pp. 138–42.

14. Gramsci 1987, p. 367; 1990a, p. 142.

he begins to see proletarian rule as something to be exerted by various organisations.

The present form of the class struggle for power is embodied in the Councils. This, then, is the network of institutions in which the revolutionary process is unfolding: the Councils, the trade unions, the Socialist Party.¹⁵

And elsewhere:

...the problem of constructing a State apparatus which internally will function democratically, i.e. will guarantee freedom to all anti-capitalist tendencies and offer them the possibility of forming a proletarian government...¹⁶

Finally, there is yet another essential lesson from the Ordinovist Gramsci: for the socialist state-machine to work democratically and for the effectiveness of this whole variety of institutions and parties, it is necessary for democracy to exist within the factory, in the place of production, in the basic cell of the material infrastructure of society.

Opposing these far-reaching, potential-filled institutions, stood Bordiga's narrow, maximalist conception, which, as we will see, he retained during the entire period of his leadership of the new Communist Party. First, Bordiga saw as 'reformist gradualism' every kind of approximation to the final goal and every intermediary achievement that widens the working class's hegemony and alters the actual balance of forces. It is not by chance, therefore, that he openly defends a position of passive expectation, of waiting for the 'great day': 'maximalism will have its *first* victory when the proletariat conquers *all* power'.¹⁷ And, in a statement that seems to answer Gramsci's refusal to identify the dictatorship of the proletariat with the dictatorship of the party, Bordiga says:

Tomorrow's soviets will have their genesis in the local sections of the Communist Party. These sections should make ready the elements that, immediately after revolutionary victory, will be offered to the vote of the proletarian electoral mass, in order to create the local delegates' councils.¹⁸

A conception of political leadership as something imposed from above, through elections restricted to the confirmation of decisions already taken by the leaders of the party – this is the alternative proposed by Bordiga to Gramsci's conception of a pluralist grassroots-democracy.

15. Gramsci 1987, p. 571; 1990a, p. 146.

16. Gramsci 1987, p. 342; 1990a, p. 133.

17. Bordiga 1973, p. 78.

18. Bordiga 1973, p. 41.

2.3. The defeat of the councils

As an experiment, the councils, with all their strengths and limitations, were ultimately a failure in practice. In April 1920, pressured by the bosses' intransigence, the working class of Turin – largely led by the *L'Ordine Nuovo* group – went on strike; despite its initial success in Turin, the strike remained isolated on a national scale, and the workers were thus defeated. Gramsci and his friends openly blamed the reformist unions and the leaders of the PSI for the failure; when they condemned the strike and prevented it from going national, they caused its defeat. But that was still a partial defeat. In September 1920, the industrialists – fearful of the growth and of the increasing strength of the factory-councils – threatened a lock-out if the workers continued to insist on organising the councils; once the threat was carried out, the Turin workers occupied the factories and, through the councils, proved themselves able to manage them and to ensure the continuation of production. The councils thus had an opportunity to test their own revolutionary function; they proved the feasibility of workers' self-management in the factory and the uselessness of businessmen as organisers of production. The second Giolitti administration (at the end of the War, the old liberal politician was once again called upon to form a cabinet) avoided using repressive means, expecting the movement to wear itself out; the occupations thus went on for more than two weeks. The limits of the Ordinovist conception were clearly revealed: yet again abandoned by the leaders of the PSI and by the unions, the Turin workers were forced to negotiate from an unfavourable position. They were able to preserve the internal commissions, but effectively with the same functions they had before the War: as mere organs for the defence of workers' rights within the factories. The experience had shown that the working class cannot win if it restricts its struggle to the territory of the factory: the 'national territory' of this class, contrary to what Gramsci thought at the time, is actually the *whole* social and political territory of the nation.

Soon Gramsci had weighed up the situation. In May, after the first strike, the issue of the party began to take up more and more space in the columns of *L'Ordine Nuovo*. In the beginning, Gramsci still believed – just like Lenin and the Comintern – that it was possible to find a solution to this, that is, to create a revolutionary political organ through the renovation of the old Socialist Party; the declarations of absolute support for the Russian Revolution and for the Comintern by Serrati and the majority made him believe that it was possible to transform the PSI into a Communist Party by expelling the reformists

(then in the minority).¹⁹ However, after the occupation of the factories and the defeat of the movement, Gramsci clearly turns towards a break with the PSI. The stance of resignation the maximalist leaders took towards the strike made Gramsci, even if somewhat belatedly, feel the need to create a communist fraction on the national level, a fraction able to pressure the maximalists and, if necessary, serve as the basis for the foundation of a new party. In this period, the *L'Ordine Nuovo* group worked on forming 'communist groups' inside the factories, availing itself of the prestige and connections it obtained in the struggle for the councils. In an important piece from September–October 1920, titled 'The Communist Party', Gramsci hints at some self-criticism for his prior underestimations of the party issue.²⁰ Commenting on this piece, historian Paolo Spriano makes a very pertinent observation:

[Gramsci] here talks about a new party that would rise from the ashes of the old one, a party that would be the party of the Comintern, and, therefore, a Communist Party. This kind of party, this kind of proletarian organisation – says Gramsci – is the instrument and the historical form of the 'process of intimate liberation through which the worker rises from being an executor to being leader and guide;' showing itself to be 'the very form of the proletarian revolution.' Perhaps we can venture that these features are partly those he had ascribed to the councils in prior writings.²¹

Gramsci had thus assimilated, in the period of the weekly publication of *L'Ordine Nuovo*, two important points of Lenin's thought: on the one hand, the need to treat the issue of the state as a central issue in the socialist revolution, at the same time indicating the concrete ways to *get closer* to the construction of this new state, thus breaking with the passive and spontaneist wait for 'the great explosion'; and, on the other, the need to create a new kind of party, a party that was actually communist and revolutionary, capable of leading the whole of the working class and its allies in the process of preparation for taking power and in the later construction of this power. Therefore, important steps had been taken to absorb Lenin's legacy, and this, as Giorgio Amendola remarks, 'was for Gramsci a slow realisation'.²² There was still a decisive

19. Gramsci 1987, p. 510 ff.; 1990a, pp. 190–6. It is interesting to note that Lenin wholly approved of this article, and considered it the best platform available to solve the issue of the party in Italy.

20. Gramsci 1987, pp. 851–61; 1990a, pp. 330–9.

21. Spriano 1971, p. 119.

22. Amendola 1967, p. 34. Leonardo Paggi (Paggi 1984, p. 3 ff.) claims that Gramsci's 'Leninism' only appeared later, while he stayed in Moscow (1922–3), and was essentially restricted to the adoption of the policy of a 'united front' as an adequate

point, which Gramsci would learn in the following years: the need to ground the tactics and the strategy of the working class in the concrete analysis of the national situation, the only way to correctly assess the issue of alliances, and the transformation of the working class into a national ruling class.

strategy for 'the West' (a policy which, as we will see, Lenin would adopt in 1921). Even though I believe that this aspect of Lenin's reception by Gramsci is what most strongly marks his mature thinking, it seems to me reductive to restrict the presence of 'Leninism' in the work of our author to this alone, above all in the prison-years, leaving aside, for instance, the issue of the party. In spite of his many controversial points, Paggi's book is still the best contribution so far to the study of the action and the thought of Gramsci in the years 1923–6.

Chapter Three

Passage to Maturity: 1921–6

3.1. From the foundation of the PCd'I to the fight against fascism

At the end of the First World-War, Italian socialists – with the exception of the reformists – believed that Italy was rapidly entering a revolutionary situation. Gramsci also agreed with that estimation, even if he formulated it in mediated fashion, distancing himself from any sort of fatalism. In May 1920, in the very piece in which he defends ‘the renewal of the PSI’, he states:

The present phase of the class struggle in Italy is the phase that precedes: either the conquest of political power on the part of the revolutionary proletariat...or a tremendous reaction on the part of the propertied classes and governing caste.¹

Following a dialectical method, Gramsci sees social movement as a field of alternatives, as a struggle of tendencies, the outcome of which is not ensured by any sort of unequivocal ‘economic determinism’, instead depending on the result of the struggle between collectively-organised wills. Even if it took him some time to realise the central importance of the party in bringing together a collective will, Gramsci would now dedicate himself – up to that moment

1. Gramsci 1987, p. 511; 1990a, p. 191.

he was focused on the formation of the factory-councils – to building the new party. (It is enough to recall that, soon after September 1920, the *L'Ordine Nuovo* group gave special attention to the task of forming 'communist groups' in the Turin factories.)

However, this relatively late understanding of the central importance of the issue of the party put Gramsci in a position of disadvantage relative to the communist tendency led by Amadeo Bordiga. As early as 1919, Bordiga was organising around his paper *Il Soviet* a communist fraction with national reach, the 'abstentionist maximalists'. The theoretical formation of Bordiga and his group was radically different from that of Gramsci. Bordiga accepted and radicalised all fatalist and 'catastrophist' implications of the positivist and economistic interpretation of Marxism, which was typical of the Second International: that is why he never grasped, not even after his participation in the Communist International and his role as a leader of the PCd'I, the meaning of Lenin's work, namely his drastic rupture with the tradition of the Second International, either by *bringing back* the dialectical elements which are an essential part of authentic Marxism (such as the constitutive value of praxis and subjectivity), or by *renewing* some of the teachings of the 'classics' in order to properly understand the newly emerging historical facts (such as the theory of imperialism, the importance of social and political alliances in preparing the socialist revolution, the creation of a new kind of party, and so on).

What Bordiga did, as opposed to Lenin, was to radicalise even further the immobilism that resulted from the economistic and fatalist tradition of the Second International and of the Italian maximalists, by adding to it an element that reinforces its spirit of passivity: to uphold abstention in elections from voting. Bordiga imagined it was the communists' task to create a party of the 'pure', of the intransigent, of the 'few but good'. It was thus not enough to expel the reformists and to concentrate all efforts on building the party-organisation (so as to prevent its 'contamination' by mass-movements); it was necessary, furthermore, to prevent this brigade of the 'pure' from being drawn towards parliamentary and 'democratist' illusions, which served only to strengthen the reformists. One can find a perfect summary of Bordiga's conceptions, which mix revolutionary language with the fetishism of organisation, in his polemics with the *L'Ordine Nuovo* group. He says,

Maximalism will have its *first* victory when *all* power is taken by the proletariat. Before that, it has nothing else to do but to promote an increasingly broad, conscious and homogeneous organisation of the working class in the political field.²

2. Bordiga 1973, p. 78.

The Communist Party as conceived by Bordiga was, therefore, a brigade of intransigent indoctrinators, voluntarily isolated from the masses and from actual politics, who waited for the 'great day' when the *first* and the *final* victories would happen simultaneously. Nothing could be more distant, as we can see, from the Leninist conception of the party.

Already at the meeting that unified the various communist fractions, which took place in November 1920 in Imola, the large numbers of followers of Bordiga made their preponderance clear. The unified communist fraction arrived at the Eighteenth Congress of the PSI in January 1921 in Livorno with this internal balance of forces. The fraction, bringing together Bordigist abstentionists, the *L'Ordine Nuovo* group, a wing of the maximalist majority led by Gennari, and a few members of Parliament who followed Graziadei and Marabini, obtained 58,873 votes, almost four times more than the meagre 14,685 votes obtained by the reformist tendency led by Turati. Serrati's 'centrist' fraction, however, which was the old maximalist trend temporarily renamed 'unitarian-communist', held the congress-majority with 98,028 votes. Serrati formally reaffirmed his fidelity to the CI, but refused to alter the name of the PSI to that of a Communist Party and to expel the reformist minority, two of the 21 conditions the Communist International established for the acceptance of national parties. Serrati's refusal, together with the intransigence shown by the communist fraction (an intransigence supported by the CI's delegation then-present at the Congress), made the split inevitable. The communist delegates left the discussions and met in an old theatre, where, on 21 January 1921, the foundation of the 'Communist Party of Italy, Italian Section of the Communist International' took place. A Central Committee of 15 members was elected, with a clear Bordigist majority; only two members of the *L'Ordine Nuovo* group belonged to this CC, Gramsci and Terracini (in subsequent years, Terracini became an intransigent defender of Bordiga's ultra-leftist policy). Since 1 January, *L'Ordine Nuovo* had been published as 'a weekly of the communist fraction'; now it was the official organ of the new party. Gramsci continued to be the head of the paper, but its line was now clearly defined by the party-leadership, that is, by Bordiga.³

Even though 1921 in Italy was a year marked by a massive Fascist offensive against all working-class political organisations and unions, both Communist and Socialist, the new Bordigist leadership underestimated the danger of a Fascist coup. The opinion of the PCd'I was clearly expressed in the so-called *Rome Theses*, a political resolution approved by the Second

3. On the foundation of the PCd'I, see Spriano 1967, pp. 108–21.

Party-Congress, which took place in January 1922. (Approval was granted on a merely consultative basis, as the CI, which had found the *Theses* ultra-leftist, did not approve them.) According to the *Theses*, Italy was entering a 'social-democratic phase'; the Party should wait for the full realisation of this phase, not because it was a step forward, an 'intermediary goal', or a means to stop the growing Fascist threat, but because it would mean the complete demoralisation and disintegration of the Socialist Party, thus creating the opportunity for the majority of the proletariat (which still followed the PSI) to come under the guidance of the PCd'I, paving the way for the 'great day' of proletarian insurrection. Passivity, fatalism and leftist doctrinairism are evident in this formulation: social democracy, the PSI, became the main enemy to fight and to demoralise. The PCd'I should remain pure, avoiding contamination by alliances or closer links with the mass-movements. The need for an *autonomous* organisation of the revolutionary proletariat, which was the reason behind the policy of splits then defended by Lenin and the Communist International, became, with Bordiga, a defence of isolationism and sectarianism, which appeared in the fetishistic obsession with the 'organisation' considered as an end in itself.

However, as soon as they had been formulated, it was clear that the positions of the Bordiga leadership contrasted with the policies defended by the Communist International and by Lenin in particular. At the Third Congress (1921), a 'correction of course' was already taking place in the Communist International, running counter to the positions taken by the PCd'I in its first years. Even if the splitting of the old socialist parties, either favoured or provoked by the Communist International, may have had the merit of creating autonomous organs of the revolutionary proletariat, it was not a quantitative success: in almost every European country, the majority of the working class remained under the leadership of the old social-democratic parties and affiliated with the 'reformist' unions. Besides, the world-revolution – expected by the Bolshevik leaders in the years 1918–20 as something imminent – proved to be a far more complex and mediated process, which would take a lot longer than expected: the soviet-republics of Hungary and Bavaria were defeated; the great post-war European strikes did not lead, as imagined, to insurrectionary movements.

Everywhere the capitalist reaction organised itself and went on the offensive. With his extraordinary political lucidity, Lenin in 1920 had already begun to see leftist extremism as one of the main threats that should be fought; and, as he pointed out, one of the chief errors of this extremism was the overestimation of the international value of the Russian experiment, the attempt to

transfer immediately and mechanically to the advanced West certain methods and processes which had proved valid for 'backward' Russia.⁴

The period beginning in 1921 put the issue of the relationship with social democracy in a new light. For instance, the advice Serrati supposedly received from Lenin is well-known: 'First, you must break with Turati and the reformists; then, you must ally yourself with them.' As Lenin considered it impossible to take power without the consensus of the majority of the proletariat and, as social democracy continued to represent this majority, the new communist parties had to find a means to speak to the social-democratic masses and to have influence over them. Thus, at the Third Congress of the Communist International, the proposal, directly inspired by Lenin, of a 'workers' united front' emerged: the communist parties should seek agreements with the social-democratic parties and unions, both at the top and at the base, in order to prevent the monopolistic bourgeoisie unloading the burden of the post-war economic crises on the working class and the working masses. The agreements should not be restricted to economic concerns, but should also move onto the political terrain: to this end, the International proposed as a slogan that 'workers' governments' (or 'workers' and peasants' governments' in the case of less advanced countries) were to be formed by communists, social democrats and other popular parties (or exclusively by the latter two, with the communists' external support). Such coalition-governments were seen as 'intermediate goals', as transitional stages in the struggle for the dictatorship of the proletariat. A new strategic conception for the socialist revolution in the West was beginning to be outlined, even if only in rudimentary fashion. Lenin clearly stated, as early as 1918, that, if taking power was relatively easy in Russia (the building of socialism being comparatively difficult), in the West the reverse would happen: the greater complexity of Western societies would make it hard to take power, demanding a longer process and an ability to 'do politics' far greater than what had been required in Russia. (See for instance the 'Political Report' of the Seventh Congress of the CP(B) of Russia. Lenin would repeat this idea until his death.)

The leadership of the PCd'I, and especially Bordiga, explicitly refused the new guidelines sent by the International. As an apparent compromise with the Communist International (which was largely responsible for the PCd'I's prestige), only the idea of a union-front united at the base was accepted,

4. '...after the victory of the proletarian revolution in at least one of the advanced countries... Russia will cease to be the model and will once again become a backward country (in the "Soviet" and the socialist sense)'. Lenin 1964a.

and the united political front with the Socialists was refused, as well as the 'workers' and peasants' government' slogan as an intermediate goal. The disagreement between Bordiga and the International became even greater when, in October 1922, Serrati and the maximalist majority of the PSI finally decided to expel the reformist fraction, which revived the issue of merging the PSI and the PCd'I. Bordiga was strongly opposed to the merger, sabotaging any convergence with Serrati by all means; only in 1925, when Bordiga was no longer leader of the PCd'I, and when Serrati was a minority within the PSI, did the old maximalist leader – now heading the tendency named 'Thirdist' (after its adherence to the Third International) – finally enter the Communist Party. Here we reach the period of Gramsci's anti-Bordigist stance.

In the two years immediately following the foundation of the PCd'I, 1921 and 1922, Gramsci was not very far from the positions adopted by the Bordigan majority. It is certain, though, that even before the *Rome Theses* he had a mediated and rich conception of Fascism, altogether different from the schematic conceptions of Bordiga and his group. Alfonso Leonetti, his old comrade from *L'Ordine Nuovo*, was perhaps correct when he said in 1966 that

Gramsci was the first Marxist theoretician – the only one in his time – to try to define [Fascism] while considering its class-nature and its peculiar characteristics.⁵

So, on 2 January 1921, in the second issue of the daily *L'Ordine Nuovo*, Gramsci published his famous text, 'The Monkey-People', in which he insisted on the essential novelty of the Fascist reaction: the fact that it was a reactionary movement *based on the masses*, that is, supported by the petty bourgeoisie's struggle to win back the political and economic position it was losing as Italian capitalism went through monopolistic transformations during the war-years.⁶ In a later piece published in June of the same year, titled 'Reactionary Subversiveness', he attempted to capture other specific aspects of the new reaction: for example, the fact that it appropriated tactics for obtaining access to power that were clearly different from those of the old conservative reaction: although the Fascists were tolerated and even supported by the legal apparatuses of the state, they acted 'from below', from movements existing on the margin of state-institutions, and they often left the realm of legality to promote what Gramsci called 'reactionary subversiveness'.⁷ Gramsci also noted, in his August piece 'The Two Fascisms', that the Fascist movement had 'two nuclei' with two distinct origins: on the one hand, a petty-bourgeois,

5. Leonetti 1970, p. 36.

6. Gramsci 1966, pp. 297–9; 1990a, pp. 372–4.

7. Gramsci 1966, pp. 204–6; 1990b, pp. 46–7.

urban movement, with an anti-proletarian orientation, and, on the other, the storm-troopers of the big landowners against the peasant-movements. According to Gramsci, these 'two nuclei' created internal splits in Fascism, making its tactics oscillate between 'legalism' and 'subversiveness', or, more precisely, a clever and pragmatic combination of the two methods.⁸

However, what I think is lacking in Gramsci's writings from this period is a conception of Fascism that considers it not only as a reactionary *movement* of a new kind, able to give a mass-basis to the dominant economic groups, but also as a possible reactionary *régime* of a new kind (this is understandable when we remember that Fascism had not yet reached power: Fascism would only achieve absolute power in 1926). Fascism, then, is a dictatorship of financial capital, supported by a vast network of mass-organisations, and by the organised consensus of the majority of the population. It is, all in all, a régime radically different from the old conservative dictatorships of a semi-parliamentary or military kind. There is no doubt that elements of a theory of Fascism *as a régime* begin to appear in the writings that followed the 'March on Rome'. For instance, in his speech at the PCd'I Congress that took place in the French city of Lyons in 1926, Gramsci noted: 'Indeed, it is necessary to examine the stratifications of fascism itself; for given *the totalitarian system which fascism tends to install*, it will be within fascism itself that the conflicts which cannot express themselves in other ways will tend to re-emerge'.⁹ These premises, together with the observations made by Gramsci on the Fascist *movement*, were brilliantly collected and systematised by Togliatti in the lectures he gave in Moscow in 1935,¹⁰ which I think are one of the most complete and systematic theories of Fascism as a totalitarian régime. I believe the underestimation of the possibility of a Fascist *régime* – a clear gap in Gramsci's writings in 1921 and 1922 – explains, partly at least, Gramsci's 'capitulation' before the Bordiga majority: Gramsci ended up accepting the idea of an imminent social-democratic phase in Italy, for which Fascism would only serve to prepare the ground for, either knowingly or unknowingly. (Bordiga even said in 1921, anticipating the 'social-fascism' ultraleftist line that was later approved by the Communist International in 1929, that 'Fascists and social-democrats are two aspects of the same future enemy'.)¹¹

So it was that in July 1921, Gramsci, who had so aptly analysed the novelty of the Fascist movement, ended up reducing it to 'a predetermined political plan, aimed at obliging the socialist leaders to return to constitutional legality

8. Gramsci 1966, pp. 297–9; 1990b, pp. 63–5.

9. Gramsci 1971a, p. 486; 1990b, p. 350.

10. Togliatti 1970.

11. Spriano 1967, p. 127.

and to persuade them to collaborate.¹² Furthermore, demonstrating that he agreed with Bordiga (who refused the political 'united front' with the socialists), he said that

The advance of the working class will be met by a coalition of all reactionary elements, from the fascists to the *popolari* [the forebears of Christian Democracy] and socialists: the socialists will indeed become the vanguard of anti-proletarian reaction, because they best know the weaknesses of the working class...¹³

As late as February 1922, a mere 10 months before the 'March on Rome' that would bring Mussolini to power, Gramsci talked again of the 'future Italian social-democratic state' as a 'common task' being carried out by 'the *popolari* and socialists', and even said that 'even in the Fascist Party there are obvious symptoms of the social-democratic malady'.¹⁴ Given such conditions, there followed the conclusion that

the struggle against social-democracy, the struggle against the treacherous Socialist Party, is all part of the struggle to liberate the Italian proletariat from servitude of any form.¹⁵

The attack on socialists is not restricted to the reformist Right, becoming even harsher when directed at Serrati's 'centrists', who Gramsci does not hesitate to call 'maximalist bastards'.¹⁶ Commenting on this phase of brutal sectarianism within the PCd'I, Spriano notes,

The 'Turinese' were not an exception. The democratic appeals and the libertarian passion that animated *L'Ordine Nuovo* seemed silenced and strangled, or, to put it better, abandoned within the party.¹⁷

It is not easy to explain the reasons for Gramsci's adherence to Bordiga's most schematic and doctrinal theses. Inspired by maximalist passivity, by radical economistic fatalism and by a doctrinal and 'apocalyptic' concept of the revolution, these theses proved themselves to be directly opposed to the cultural and ideological reasoning that had inspired Gramsci's action and theoretical

12. Gramsci 1966, p. 224; 1990b, p. 52.

13. Gramsci 1966, p. 226; 1990b, pp. 54–5.

14. Gramsci 1966, p. 453.

15. Gramsci 1966, p. 455.

16. Gramsci 1966, p. 379.

17. Spriano 1967, p. 182. However, addressing the role attributed to the unions in the *Rome Theses*, written by Tasca and Gramsci, Spriano (p. 183) notes that it 'undoubtedly reveals an unitarian concern more intense [than that of the political theses written by Bordiga]. One can easily see, in the second part [of the union-theses], the classic Ordinovist-Gramscian motifs: the system of factory-councils and workers' control'.

formation, not only in its early period (until 1918), but also in the time of the weekly *L'Ordine Nuovo* (1919–20). We should not omit to mention a sincere and intimate bond motivated by a certain 'inferiority-complex' of Gramsci's in the face of Bordiga's undeniable organisational skills and extraordinary vitality (as opposed to the weak physical and psycho-nervous conditions of the young Sardinian), but also, and above all, because Bordiga had been the one to anticipate the theme of the struggle for a new party in the period when Gramsci had been focusing solely on the issue of the councils. This is not, however, Togliatti's view: based on later indications by Gramsci himself, Togliatti believed this adherence to have been only a public one, while in private Gramsci criticised the sectarian positions of the *Rome Theses*, only maintaining discretion for fear of helping the 'minority of the Right' (Tasca, Graziadei), which was manoeuvring within the Communist International to cast Bordiga aside and to conquer the leadership of the Party by means of an administrative move from above.¹⁸

3.2. The struggle against sectarianism

Whatever one's opinion on this matter, the fact remains that Gramsci's 'adherence' to Bordiga's positions (or, if you will, his strategic silence regarding them) did not last very long. A change of circumstances would lead to a decisive turn in the attitudes and political ideas of the Sardinian communist: in May 1922, he was sent to Moscow as a PCd'I representative in the Communist International. There he had the opportunity to deepen further his knowledge and assimilation of the essential principles of Lenin's political theory. As a consequence, in the letters that Gramsci sent from Moscow and Vienna to Togliatti and to other old friends of the weekly *L'Ordine Nuovo*, beginning in May 1923, we see him breaking with Bordiga's conceptions and revealing his adherence to the 'united-frontist' theses of the International. He also began to exhort his old friends to create with him a 'leading centre' that could defeat Bordiga's ultraleftist line and, at the same time, prevent the rightist minority from taking over the leadership of the Party with the external support of the International.¹⁹

In his letter to Togliatti dated 18 May 1923, Gramsci begins with self-criticism:

18. Togliatti 1974b, p. 22.

19. The 1923–4 correspondence between Gramsci and his friends can be found in Togliatti 1974b, pp. 45–345. See also, on this period, Togliatti's introduction on pp. 11–40 of the same volume.

...it is necessary to create within the party a nucleus – which is not a faction – of comrades who have the highest degree of ideological homogeneity, and are therefore able to impress upon our practical activity the greatest possible unity of leadership. We, the old Turin group, have made many errors in this field....as a result of the revulsion we felt in 1919–20 against the idea of creating a faction, we remained isolated, mere individuals or little more than that; while in the other group, the abstentionist one [Bordiga], the tradition of work in common, as a faction, left deep traces which still have very considerable ideological and practical repercussions on the life of the party today.

After showing his agreement with the Communist International's line, which Bordiga rejected, Gramsci says,

I believe that we, our group, must remain at the head of the party, because we are really in the line of historical development... We are in the flow of the historical current and will succeed, provided we 'row' well and keep a firm grasp on the rudder.

On the other hand, already in this first letter, Gramsci names two essential points on which there should be a break with Bordiga's abstract and immobilist doctrinairism:

We must develop a discussion of present politics and not a study of general historical phenomena. We must make practical proposals and indicate to the masses practical paths of action and organisation.²⁰

In a short article published two years later, in July 1925, Gramsci would summarise the points on which his new dialectical perspective, inspired by Lenin, ran counter to Bordiga's maximalism. He began with a lucid description of maximalism's theoretical essence:

Maximalism is a fatalistic and mechanical conception of Marx's doctrine.... [According to maximalism] it is ineluctable that the proletariat will win.... It is pointless for us to act: what is the good of acting and fighting if victory is fated and ineluctable? So says a maximalist in the Maximalist Party. But there is also the maximalist who is not in the Maximalist Party, but instead in the Communist Party.... But he also believes that it would be pointless to act and struggle day-by-day; he only waits for the great day. The masses – he says – cannot but come to us, because the objective situation is driving them to the revolution. And so let us wait, without all these stories about tactical manoeuvres and similar expedients.²¹

20. Gramsci 1992a, pp. 118, 120, 121; 1990b, p. 138 ff.

21. Gramsci 1971a, p. 248.

Gramsci then turned to Lenin's method, a dialectical method that took into account all mediations and 'tricks' of the real:

Comrade Lenin has taught us that in order to defeat our class-enemy, who is strong, who has many means and reserves at his disposal, we must exploit every crack in his front and must use every possible ally, even if he is uncertain, vacillating or provisional. He has taught us that in a war of armies you can not attain the strategic goal, which is the destruction of the enemy and the occupation of his territory, without having first attained a series of tactical objectives – which aim at breaking up the enemy – and then confronting him in the field.²²

In this brief piece, Gramsci reveals two things: one, that, thanks to Lenin, he was already able to convert his old and deep-rooted rejection of the fatalist and mechanistic view of Marxism into a positive, concrete dialectical method, aimed at the materialist analysis of reality; two, that he had already absorbed – thanks again to the influence of Lenin, but also going beyond him – certain insights which later, in the *Notebooks*, would lead him to consider the 'war of position' as the proper method for the conquest of hegemony and power in the more complex Western societies.

Thus, the battle against Bordiga was fought in the name of Lenin, but not in the name of a Lenin conceived as a chest of ready-made definitions, a Lenin understood as the creator of an abstract and doctrinaire 'Leninism' (similar to what Stalin was beginning to propose), but in the name of the dialectical and materialist *method* that lies at the basis of practical action and of the main political formulations of the great Russian revolutionary: a method that shows, through differentiated (concrete) analysis of the real and respect towards its mediations, the basic task of Marxism conceived as a guide to action. However, in spite of this, it took Gramsci a certain amount of effort – as revealed by the letters exchanged between 1923 and 1924 – to convince his old comrades from *L'Ordine Nuovo* (Togliatti, Terracini, Leonetti, Scoccimarro) to break with Bordiga's line and start a 'new course' within the Party. This power of persuasion came largely from the fairness, the lucidity and the intellectual confidence he displayed when he confronted and analysed, in his letters and newspaper-articles from that period, the issues that presented themselves before the young PCd'I and before the international communist movement.

In a long letter dated 9 February 1924, sent from Vienna (the Fascist government had issued an arrest-warrant against him), Gramsci listed all the points

22. Gramsci 1971a, pp. 248–9.

of his disagreement with Bordiga. First, he harshly denounced the organisational fetishism that prevailed in the first two years of the PCd'I:

The error of the party has been to have accorded priority in an abstract fashion to the problem of party organisation, which in practice has simply meant creating an apparatus of functionaries who could be depended on for their orthodoxy towards the official view. It was believed, and it is still believed, that the revolution depends only on the existence of such an apparatus; and it is sometimes even believed that its existence can bring about the revolution.²³

Contrasting with the Bordiga's idea of the 'better fewer, but better', of a party consisting only of its cadre, Gramsci insisted – particularly in the years 1924–6 – on the need to turn the PCd'I into a mass-party, organically connected with the popular movements. This, according to Gramsci, would be the only way for the Party to abandon immobilist fatalism and 'to act politically' in an effective way:

One may say that, in the last meeting [in May 1924 in Como, when Gramsci became *de facto* leader of the PCd'I in Bordiga's place], our party for the first time explicitly raised the issue of becoming the party of the widest Italian masses, the party which brings forth the proletariat's hegemony within the larger picture of of the alliance between the working class and peasant-mass.²⁴

In sum, Gramsci did not believe organisation to be an end in itself, but something that should be adapted in order to become an expression of the adopted political line. Therefore, if it is necessary to break from isolation, to conquer the hegemony of the working class in the daily struggle, then the organisational instrument adequate to such a political line must be a mass-party. In thus making organisation subordinate to the political line, Gramsci showed that he had learned one more lesson from Lenin.

On the other hand, Gramsci denounced the 'managerial' conception of the revolution present in Bordiga's organisational theory, insisting on the need to abandon doctrinairism, to undertake a concrete, differentiated analysis of situations. He wrote,

In the political field, it is necessary to draw up detailed theses on the Italian situation and the possible phases of its further development... Within a given space of time our party will have the majority with it. But if this period will

23. Gramsci 1992a, p. 231; 1990b, pp. 197–8.

24. Gramsci 1971a, p. 182.

perhaps not be long chronologically, it will undoubtedly be packed with *supplementary phases*, which we will have to foresee with some accuracy in order to be able to manoeuvre and avoid making mistakes...²⁵

The first concrete application of the idea of 'supplementary phases' (or intermediate phases) would appear clearly during the period of the Matteotti crisis of 1924, when Fascism – publicly-accused of having murdered the socialist congressman – suffered an intense and apparently fatal crisis of hegemony and legitimacy; at this point, it became evident that it was possible for a 'democratic *intermezzo*', in the words of Gramsci, to take place between the fall of Fascism and the projected dictatorship of the proletariat, that is, for a return to the liberal-democratic régime under the leadership of the bourgeois anti-Fascist parties together with the reformist parties. Still in 1926, when Mussolini had already controlled the damage caused by the Matteotti case, Gramsci insisted again on the idea – an idea he would never abandon, not even in prison, as will be seen later – that 'it is ...not certain, and not even probable, that the passage from Fascism to the dictatorship of the proletariat will be a direct one'.²⁶ To this dialectical perspective of the mediations of the real – which implies the understanding that the direction of social movement is never unambiguous, and always presents alternatives – corresponds Gramsci's acceptance of the need for intermediate slogans, such as the 'workers' and peasants' government', able to overcome a situation of impasse positively and to alter the balance of forces in favour of the proletariat. It is certain that for Gramsci, at the time, the 'workers' and peasants' government' (and other intermediate slogans in general) were a more instrumental conception, leaning on agitational perspectives, more connected with the leftist orientation Zinoviev gave the International after the Fifth Congress (1924) than with Lenin's original inspiration. An example of this instrumental and agitational conception appears in the *Lyons Theses*, in which Gramsci states that 'workers' and peasants' government' is 'an agitational slogan', and that it does not 'correspond to a real phase of historical development'.²⁷

Gramsci demonstrated yet another methodological concern clearly inspired by Lenin, namely to concretise *nationally* the slogans of a general nature, thus eliminating their necessarily abstract character. Thus, as early as 1924, he noted the need to 'to establish concretely the meaning in Italy of the workers' and peasants' government slogan, and to give this slogan a national political

25. Gramsci 1992a, pp. 235–6; 1990b, pp. 201–2.

26. Gramsci 1971a, p. 119; 1990b, p. 406.

27. Gramsci 1971a, p. 513; 1990b, p. 370.

substance'.²⁸ Soon he would put this into practice: by taking into consideration the significance of the issue of the institutions in Italy, that is, the fact that the monarchy was already seen by most of the opposition and the popular strata as one of the pillars of Fascism, Gramsci proposed an 'Italian translation' of the slogan of the workers' and peasants' government: the idea of pushing for a republican constituent assembly based on workers' and peasants' councils. Certainly, it still was a narrow slogan, to the extent that its second part – the idea of the councils – could not be accepted by bourgeois-democratic anti-Fascist and republican elements; nevertheless, it manifested through its method an effort at national concreteness, which was a distinctive feature of Lenin's thought, and which, from this moment onwards, was among Gramsci's constant concerns. In 1926, for instance, he once again affirmed that

for all the capitalist countries, a fundamental problem is posed – the problem of the transition from the united front tactic, understood in a general sense, to a specific tactic which confronts the concrete problems of national life and operates on the basis of the popular forces as they are historically determined.²⁹

This is an indication of the method that Gramsci would later use in his most important work of the pre-prison period, the unfinished study on 'The Southern Question'.

All the new Gramscian themes – the need for concrete analyses of the Italian situation, the question of intermediate slogans, the defence of realistic politics against maximalist passivity, the struggle for a mass-party, and so forth – were summarised in the famous *Lyons Theses*, the important document written by Gramsci and Togliatti and approved by a large majority (90.2%) at the Third Congress of the PCd'I, which took place in January 1926.³⁰ It is true that, in spite of the countless positive elements (among them the attempt to perform a Marxist analysis of Italian society and its tendencies, being the first attempt of the kind undertaken by the PCd'I since its foundation, deserves emphasis), the *Lyons Theses* still have weak points, which signal perhaps not exactly the personal limitations of Gramsci's thought at the time, but the very limitations of the general political conception of the Third International. (These limitations, moreover, would only be partially overcome at the Seventh Congress of the Communist International in 1935, with the formulation of the proposal of a 'popular front', the starting-point of the process of overcoming the conception of political democracy and alliances as mere instruments. Only then would

28. Gramsci 1971a, p. 181; 1990b, p. 235.

29. Gramsci 1971a, p. 119; 1990b, p. 420.

30. Gramsci 1971a, pp. 488–513; 1990b, pp. 340–75.

communists show that, with the impact of the Fascist and Nazi experiences, they had begun to explore, even though in still-insufficient ways, the issue of democracy.) In 1978, Giorgio Amendola provided an effective synthesis of the 'erroneous judgements' and 'doctrinal rigidity' still to be found in the *Lyons Theses*. Amendola opined that these negative points can be summarised

in judging other political forces, particularly the socialist ones; in pointing at a supposed division of counter-revolutionary tasks between Fascism and democracy; in the instrumental nature of intermediate political goals; in the inability to coherently link the struggle for democracy and the struggle for socialism.³¹

Many of these limitations, as we will see, were to be overcome by Gramsci in his prison-notes, in which his relationship with Lenin's legacy was no longer defined by assimilation, but by a dialectic of continuity-overcoming. Nevertheless, the existence of such limits does not cancel the significance of the *Lyons Theses* and, more broadly, the permanent value of many of the concepts created by Gramsci during the final stage of his passage to maturity. Amendola himself acknowledges the historical significance of the Lyons Congress:

After Lyons, the PCI was able to make its way, to develop policy, to face the hardships of clandestinity, to pay the high price of sacrifices. After Lyons, the PCI had a united leading group, formed around Gramsci, bred in rich political experience and in tough political struggle. In this sense, one can say that the Third Congress of the PCI was the true constitutional congress of the Party.³²

3.3. The first formulations of the concept of hegemony

In spite of the limitations mentioned above, it was in the period from 1921 to 1926, and especially in the last three years, that Gramsci's passage to maturity effectively took place: it was in this phase that, drawing from elements of Lenin's thought, some of the basic concepts that Gramsci would develop in the *Prison Notebooks* began to take shape. These concepts represent his particular, original contribution to the development and renewal of Marxism. The first relatively mature formulation of these basic concepts appears in two pieces written by Gramsci after the *Lyons Theses*, both in October 1926, a month before his imprisonment: that is, in his famous letter to the Central

31. Amendola 1978, p. 102.

32. Amendola 1978, pp. 102–3.

Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and in his unfinished essay on 'The Southern Question'.

However, before that, in 1924, having come to understand Lenin's observations on the greater difficulty of taking power in advanced capitalist societies, Gramsci formulated for the first time an idea that, developed and concretised, later became the axis around which the prison-notes revolve: the idea of a structural difference between the socio-economic formations of the 'West' and of the 'East', with the consequence that it was necessary to develop strategies that take this difference into account and adapt to it. As he noted in an already-mentioned February 1924 letter,

... in central and western Europe the development of capitalism has not only determined the formation of the broad proletarian strata, but also – and as a consequence – has created the higher stratum, the labour aristocracy, with its appendages in the trade-union bureaucracy and the social-democratic groups. The determination, which in Russia was direct and drove the masses onto the streets for a revolutionary uprising, in central and western Europe is complicated by all these political superstructures, created by the greater development of capitalism. This makes the action of the masses slower and more prudent, and therefore requires of the revolutionary party a strategy and tactics altogether more complex and long-term than those which were necessary for the Bolsheviks in the period between March and November 1917.³³

The core of this more complex and long-term strategy – which hints at the idea of the 'war of position' – lies in the issue of hegemony, in the issue of class-alliances. The understanding of the need 'to act politically', which came to him from assimilating the Bolsheviks' experiences, in this period enabled Gramsci to grasp the central importance of a policy of alliances. He no longer affirmed, as he had when theorising about the councils, that the factory was the 'national territory' of the working class. Gramsci was now convinced that in order to become the 'leading class' and to triumph with this more complex and long-term strategy, the proletariat could not limit itself to controlling economic production, but should also exert its politico-cultural leadership over the ensemble of social forces that were, for whatever reason and in whatever fashion, opposed to capitalism. Moreover, in order to be able to do so, the working class must know the effective *national* territory over which it acts, it must know and command the mechanisms of *total reproduction* of the socio-economic formation it intends to transform. In the case of Italy,

33. Gramsci 1992a, p. 233; 1990b, pp. 199–200.

such total reproduction was necessarily related to the 'Southern Question'. The industrial bourgeoisie was able to put the mechanisms of reproduction of Italian capitalism to work because it maintained residues of feudalism in the South and formed a historic ruling bloc together with the southern landowners. In order to break such mechanisms, the working class had to itself seize upon the task of solving the 'Southern Question': it had to make a political turn to the mass of peasants and to lead them to the realisation of a radical land-reform, putting an end to the power of landowners and thus destroying the hegemonic relations that the industrial bourgeoisie of the North continued to exert over the southern population as a whole. These are the themes Gramsci discussed in his famous essay, 'Some Aspects of the Southern Question'.³⁴

Gramsci's perception of the central importance of the 'Southern Question' for Italy did not, however, begin with this essay, nor did it end with it. As we have seen, ever since his early youth, Gramsci always ascribed a special significance to the problems of southern Italy, and he would continue to do so many times in the *Prison Notebooks*, in which this theme is used as a starting-point for a profound and acute examination of the vicissitudes of Italian capitalism. Even if this is done with more precision in the *Notebooks*, in earlier texts Gramsci already pointed to the main feature of Italian capitalism: the fact it was a weak capitalism, led by a bourgeoisie unable to break with the elements of backwardness that existed in Italian society, and to impose its political project on the nation as a whole. The *Risorgimento*, the movement for national unification which took place in the middle of the nineteenth century, was led by a moderate liberal bourgeoisie, allied with the great landowning sectors, and guided by the Piedmontese monarchy, turning it into what Gramsci called a 'passive revolution' (or 'revolution from above', 'revolution without revolution'), that is, a process of transformation that excluded from the new power-bloc the popular and democratic forces, the forces interested in completely eliminating the feudal residues and thus in an agrarian revolution that could integrate the peasants into the modern economy and attract them to the sphere of democratic hegemony. Moderate liberals had 'co-opted' the more active elements of the Party of Action, the radical petty-bourgeois democratic party, but they did fulfil its programme; this 'transformist' process (which neutralises parts of the vanguard of the radical forces by means of their co-option by the dominant bloc) is, according to Gramsci himself, the main form of achieving consensus in a process of 'passive revolution'. By excluding the popular masses and renewing the country 'from above', the *Risorgimento*

34. Gramsci 1971a, pp. 137–58; 1990b, pp. 441–62.

established a process of conservative modernisation in Italy. This is why one of the terms Gramsci used to describe it was 'revolution-restoration', meaning that the development of productive forces corresponded to the conservation of backward elements in social relations.³⁵

To the extent that it left the problem of a radical, Jacobin agrarian reform unsolved, the 'revolution from above' of the *Risorgimento* created the 'Southern Question', which had, as its main expression, the lack of integration of the southern peasant-world into the processes of political and economic modernisation. Furthermore, Gramsci believed that the Italian bourgeoisie was no longer capable of dealing with the 'Southern Question' by altering its system of alliances. The reason for this was that Italian capitalism not only had been 'passively' imposed from above, but it was also weak, late, and therefore unable to enjoy the advantages of widespread colonial exploitation. The South, a backward and semi-feudal region, had objectively served as a colonial territory exploited by the industrial bourgeoisie of the North. The South was a captive (though restricted) market, guarded by protectionism, and, more importantly, it was also a supplier of cheap labour for northern industry. This situation favoured not only the northern bourgeoisie, but also the great land-owners of the South, who were thus protected by the state against radical transformations in the *status* of rural property. What is more, the large profit-margins enjoyed by the northern bourgeoisie, thanks to protectionism and to the vast industrial army kept in reserve, favoured attempts to undertake a transformist 'co-optation' of certain layers of the working class that had their political expression in reformism. With that, a privileged sector of the working class – a 'labour-aristocracy' – ultimately contributed to reinforcing the agrarian-industrial bloc that dominated the country and was directly responsible for the extremely poor living conditions of the southern peasantry.

Therefore, the alliance of workers and peasants was, for Gramsci, a condition for the victory of the proletarian revolution.³⁶ First, however, it was a way to break the reformists' influence on the working class, 'to change the political

35. There is an evident convergence between the Gramscian concepts of 'passive revolution', 'revolution-restoration' and so on and the Leninist concept of 'the Prussian path' (particularly in the way it was presented in Lenin 1972, p. 239 ff.) The difference would lie mainly in the emphasis, since while Lenin stresses the economic aspects of 'conservative modernisation' (although not forgetting its political aspects), Gramsci focuses especially on the political and superstructural aspects. On the concept of 'passive revolution', see Chapter Six.

36. 'The proletariat can become the leading [*dirigente*] and the dominant class to the extent that it succeeds in creating a system of class alliances which allows it to mobilize the majority of the working population against capitalism and the bourgeois state'. (Gramsci 1971a, p. 145; 1990b, p. 448.)

stance and general ideology of the proletariat itself, as a national element'.³⁷ So, by taking upon itself the 'Southern Question', the working class would leave the sphere of bourgeois hegemony and become a national class, thus able to exert its own hegemony over the peasants, who were the majority of those who worked. The problem of hegemony, of achieving consensus, now appears as the central issue of the Gramscian strategy for the transition to socialism. In order to achieve hegemony, it is necessary for the proletariat to abandon the corporatist mindset, which manifests itself as reformism, and stop defending only its immediate group-interests, as to transform itself into a *national class*: a class that adopts and makes its own all the demands of the working classes and particularly, in the actual case of Italy at the time, of the southern peasant-masses. In a discussion of Gramsci's 'The Southern Question', Luciano Gruppi wrote:

This is what hegemony is: to identify the peculiar features of a historical condition, of a process; to become the protagonist of the demands of other social strata, and of the solutions to these demands, uniting around oneself these strata, allying oneself with them in the struggle against capitalism, and thus isolating capitalism itself. The Italian working class becomes the leading class when it makes the southern question a national question. For Gramsci, to deal with the question of working-class hegemony means to deal with the question of the national role of the working class.³⁸

The idea that the achievement of hegemony by a particular class implies its transformation into a national class – that is, that it is only possible to be the dominant class once the status of leading class and the consensus of the majority of the workers have been obtained – is Gramsci's greatest theoretical realisation in his last years before prison. We could say that this was the great theme he took with him to prison, the connecting thread of his mature reflections. It is true that, in 1926, he still lacked, at least in any explicit and systematic fashion, the concept of 'civil society' – or, more precisely, the theory of the state as a synthesis of 'political society' and 'civil society' – a concept that would give the Gramscian notion of hegemony its distinctive character, its essential novelty: as we will see, 'civil society' becomes the *material bearer* of the social function of hegemony. However, the idea of articulating domination and leadership, the creation of the new proletarian state and hegemony, had appeared already in 1926, and not only in the essay on the 'Southern Question' as usually suggested. It also appeared in the famous

37. Gramsci 1971a, p. 149; 1990b, p. 450.

38. Gruppi 1972, p. 78.

letter that Gramsci sent in the name of the Central Committee of the PCd'I to the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party shortly before his incarceration, discussing the divergences which had erupted between the majority who defended Bukharin and Stalin on the one hand, and the minority led by Trotsky and Zinoviev on the other.

The immediate goal of the letter was to ask the Soviet leaders not to let the divergences lead to a split, so as to avoid a loss of prestige for the USSR and the CPSU before the international workers' movement. Even though Gramsci aligned himself with the majority, attributing the greater risk of a split to the opposition, he directly stated that he was not sure that the majority would be able to avoid excesses in its victory (he feared that it *stravinca*, that it will 'thrash' the defeated opponents). The following years only proved that Gramsci's fears were not unfounded: the methods of the *stravittoria*, reaching the ignominious trials of the 1930s, became the rule in the disputes among Bolsheviks during the years of Stalinist terror.

Besides this immediate goal, the letter has a categorical core that I believe is of the greatest importance. I speak of the central concern with the question of hegemony, with the need for proletarian power not to limit its action to mere coercion, but to base it above all on the consensus of the working masses and, in particular, that of the peasantry (who were the majority of the population of the USSR at the time). Gramsci is convinced, on the one hand, that the questions of hegemony will be posed in a new fashion in the more advanced countries of the West:

...all the problems inherent in the proletariat's hegemony will certainly present themselves in our country in a more complex and sharp form even than in Russia – because the density of the rural population in Italy is enormously greater; because our peasants have an extremely rich tradition of organization...³⁹

In such countries, the conquest of hegemony must precede the conquest of power. He insists, on the other hand, on the fact that even in less politically-complex societies like Russia, the working class cannot underestimate the issue of hegemony: even after having achieved power, it must continue to *lead* (if it was already doing so) or to fight for leadership (if it was not already playing a leadership-role). And, just as in a developed capitalist country, even under a proletarian government the condition for this class to become a hegemonic force is to overcome every corporatist instinct and rise to the position of a national class:

39. Gramsci 1971a, p. 128; 1990b, p. 430.

...the proletariat will only be able to carry out its leading function if it is very rich in the spirit of sacrifice, and has freed itself completely from every residue of reformist or syndicalist corporatism...⁴⁰

This is why Gramsci gave his support to the majority, which defended the New Economic Policy (NEP) proposed by Lenin. As is known, the NEP had among its main goals promoting a *gradual* transition to socialism, especially in the countryside, a transition based on the peasants' consensus (which would be obtained through a cultural battle and through economic stimuli), and not on coercion and violence (as had occurred in 1918–21, during the period of 'war-communism'). Gramsci, like Lenin, was convinced that the NEP was the only strategy for building socialism that was able to preserve the consensus of the working class and, therefore, its domination *with hegemony*. Thus he defends the NEP because he is convinced, in sum, that the proletariat

...cannot maintain its hegemony and its dictatorship if, even when it has become dominant, it does not sacrifice these immediate [corporatist] interests for the general and permanent interests of the class [socialism].⁴¹

In the policy defended by the opponents of the NEP – who argued for accelerated industrialisation and fast collectivisation, via the expropriation of the peasantry⁴² – Gramsci saw a lethal risk to the very survival of the dictatorship of the proletariat: with such a policy,

the fundamental relations of alliance between workers and peasants...are disturbed and placed in danger: i.e., the pillars of the workers' State and the revolution.⁴³

In this sense, Gramsci's open support for the majority's policy is nothing less than an *avant la lettre* defence of the policy of Bukharin and of the trend that Stalin would later label as 'the Right Opposition'. This statement may seem rather fanciful, considering that there are no documents to attest to Gramsci's adherence to Bukharin's positions in the years that followed, and moreover anyone can see that a large part of the *Notebooks* is dedicated to a very harsh critique of Bukharin's *Theory of Historical Materialism*. However, it is important to recall that, first of all, *Historical Materialism*, a work of philosophy, was

40. Gramsci 1971a, p. 129; 1990b, p. 431.

41. Gramsci 1971a, p. 130; 1990b, p. 432.

42. The principles of this policy are explained, for instance, in Evgeny Preobrazhensky's theses on 'socialist primitive accumulation' (see Preobrazhensky 1965). Bukharin answered Preobrazhensky, defending the NEP (Bukharin 1967). For Bukharin's position before and during the Stalinist 'turn' that terminated the NEP, see Cohen 1990, p. 187 ff. and Bertolissi 1982, *passim*.

43. Gramsci 1971a, p. 129; 1990b, p. 433.

published in 1921, when Bukharin was still a long way from abandoning his old leftist positions and becoming the NEP's main theoretician (this would only happen in 1923). Second, we are not discussing conscious support given by Gramsci to Bukharin after 1928, but the fact that the ideas expressed in his letter (and in many of the texts in the *Notebooks*) *objectively* represent an adherence to Bukharin's policy and a condemnation of Stalin's policy after 1928. As is well-known, less than two years after Gramsci's letter, Stalin had already abandoned the NEP (which only Bukharin and his friends continued to defend) and was getting ready to implement, perhaps even more radically, the policy of the Trotskyist-Zinovievist opposition defeated in 1926, a policy centred precisely on forced industrialisation and on collectivisation 'from above', that is, imposed by coercion. Therefore, it was not without reason that Trotsky, at the time, accused Stalin of 'stealing' his programme; nor that a significant part of the old opposition, particularly its main economic theoretician, Preobrazhensky, chose to undertake 'self-criticism' and to completely adhere to Stalin's 'Great Turn'.⁴⁴ On the other hand, it is important to recall that this 'Turn' – which broke the worker-peasant bloc and thus weakened the working class's hegemony over the countryside-masses – was at the root of the processes that eventually led the dictatorship of the proletariat first to radically narrow its consensual bases, and then to more and more take on the form of a dictatorship of the Party's apparatus, and finally degenerate into a personal dictatorship. Consensus was replaced by overt coercion. In my view, the notes Gramsci wrote in prison about 'statolatry' seem to clearly represent a critique of Stalin's actions, that is, of the strengthening of the state-as-coercion to the detriment of the organisms of Soviet civil society, still rudimentary at the time.⁴⁵

The application of the concept of hegemony/consensual leadership to the Soviet Union, and not only to the 'Western' countries, signals the universal value Gramsci ascribes to it. It is also worth mentioning that, in 'The Southern Question', Gramsci shows that he had understood a new aspect of the issues of hegemony and of alliances: a new social bloc, he thinks, is not pieced together only by the convergence of economic or even political interests, but also by affinities of a cultural nature. Thus, when he says that the peasant-question in Italy 'has taken two typical and particular forms – the Southern question and that of the Vatican',⁴⁶ he was presenting a new dimension of the question of hegemony. In order to become the leading class, the proletariat

44. Deutscher 1958, p. 462 ff.

45. On the surprising affinities between the political positions of Gramsci and Bukharin, see Paggi 1984, pp. 353–65.

46. Gramsci 1971a, p. 140; 1990b, p. 454.

must also answer the ideological questions raised by their potential allies: if the Italian peasants find an explanation for the world in the Catholic religion, if Catholicism is a daily issue for them, then it is necessary that the capacity for leadership also manifests itself in the struggle to understand the deep roots of this cultural choice, and to find in this struggle such elements as can be oriented towards the central goals of social and cultural transformation as proposed by the class that intends to become hegemonic. The battle of ideas – dialogue and cultural confrontation – assumes a decisive importance in the fight for hegemony. Gramsci's old concern with problems of cultural renewal began to find a more concrete expression. This is the reason why the question of intellectuals, and the essential role they have in the aggregation or disaggregation of a relation of hegemony, and in the formation or conservation of a 'historic bloc', appears so strongly, and with a formulation so radically new to Marxism, in the essay on 'The Southern Question'. Of course, this is also a theme that was later widely discussed and developed in the *Prison Notebooks*.

Chapter Four

Methodological Observations on the *Prison Notebooks*

The essay on 'The Southern Question' remained unfinished. On 8 November 1926, Gramsci was arrested while he was completing it. Having been elected to Parliament for the PCd'I in 1924, Gramsci believed himself to be protected by parliamentary immunities, and so was unable to avoid the 'coup within the coup' struck by Mussolini. Using a terrorist-attempt against his life a few days beforehand as a pretext, at the end of 1926 Mussolini suppressed the last, precarious democratic freedoms still in place in Italy during the first phase of his government. The growing Fascistisation of the state reached its climax: a *totalitarian system* (in Gramsci's words) came into place, in which Parliament was suppressed, all non-Fascist parties were dissolved and the whole of the population was divided into a capillary network of Fascist mass-organisations (unions and youth, women's, children's, recreational associations, and such like). Gramsci soon began a long ordeal: arrested, incarcerated, tried and sentenced to more than twenty years in prison, where he would suffer extreme illnesses. Only in April 1937 would he be released, a few days before his death, in a manoeuvre by Mussolini to prevent him from dying as a prisoner of Fascism.

4.1. The systematic nature of the *Notebooks*

During the trial in which Gramsci and other Communist leaders were condemned in June 1928, the Fascist prosecutor said: 'We must prevent this brain from working for twenty years'. This is why Gramsci had great difficulty in obtaining permission to study and to write in prison; his first notes and observations as a convict are dated February 1929, almost thirty months after his arrest and a year after his sentence. From then until April 1935, when his deteriorating health prevented him from doing any further work, Gramsci wrote virtually without interruption. His small handwriting filled 29 school-notebooks with observations and four with translation-exercises. He discussed various subjects, though organised around a few main axes; it was not uncommon for Gramsci to produce a first draft and then rewrite and reorganise his notes according to theme in the so-called 'special notebooks'. The critical edition of the notebooks, only published in 1975, runs to more than two-and-a-half-thousand pages.¹ Gramsci was fully aware of the limited character of the work he had produced so far, which, with the possible exception of the essay 'On the Southern Question', basically amounted to brief newspaper-articles, political pamphlets and speeches. I believe I have made clear in the previous chapters the value of Gramsci's pre-prison writings, but it is impossible to deny their circumstantial and heavily time-specific nature, so that a large part of it is of greater documentary than properly theoretical interest. As soon as he was arrested, he told his sister-in-law Tatiana Schucht, his main correspondent during his prison-years, in a letter of 19 March 1927, of his intention to start dedicating himself to work '*für ewig* [for ever]';² that is, work that would last and be both less attached to immediate circumstances and more systematic.

If we consider the immediate form of the work, it is apparent that his plan could not be fulfilled. Even though the *Notebooks* contain countless 'definitive' passages (especially those resulting from Gramsci's rewriting and regrouping of previous notes), they are still formally fragmentary in nature. However, if we consider the content, a concern with systematisation becomes evident: as we will see, there are a few central themes related amongst themselves,

1. Gramsci 1975. A detailed description of the *Notebooks* and of the methods used in the critical edition can be found in Valentino Gerratana 1969, pp. 455–76, and also in Gerratana's preface in Gramsci 1975, pp. xli–xlii. See also the 'Introduction' by Joseph A. Buttigieg in Gramsci 1992b, pp. 1–64. In Francioni 1984, the author critically reassessed the chronology of the texts as proposed in Gerratana's edition and offered important suggestions as to a systematic view of the *Notebooks*, highlighting the centrality of political reflection. Francioni's indications have been used to date the excerpts from the *Notebooks* discussed in the next chapters.

2. Gramsci 1996, p. 56; 1994, p. 43.

around which the vast material investigated is structurally articulated. We could say, using a distinction employed by Marx, that the *Notebooks* contain a first systematic treatment, according to their method of presentation, of the material under investigation.³ It is possible to see, particularly in the 'special notebooks', the lines of the dialectical linkage of many of the investigated determinations and categories, and this allows for the reconstruction of essential parts of the *Notebooks* according to Marx's method of *exposition*, that is, by a process of categorial development that goes from the abstract to the concrete.

It is precisely by recourse to the method of exposition that we can refute one of the most common readings of Gramsci's work, which turns Gramsci into a fragmentary thinker, whose theoretical work lacked (either because of an autonomous methodological decision, or because of the constraints of the objective conditions in which he worked) a systematic basis. One of the most recent and most brilliant formulations of such thesis comes from Giorgio Baratta, who affirms that, in Gramsci's work, 'the method of investigation and the method of exposition do not as yet appear distinct from each other'.⁴ On the contrary, it seems to me that the 'special notebooks' are attempts (not always successful, it is true) to move from the method of investigation, distinctive of the 'miscellaneous notebooks', to that of exposition, by means of a theoretical *démarche* that, as in Marx's *Das Kapital*, starts from the abstract and ends in the concrete. The expositional links (in this particular Marxian sense) present in the *Notebooks* are many.

I will restrict myself here to just one example, one which comes – not by chance – from Gramsci's reflections on politics. Gramsci stated that 'the first element [of politics] is that there really do exist rulers and ruled, leaders and led'.⁵ This 'first element' has in the *Notebooks* the same methodological function played by the commodity in the dialectical exposition of Marx's *Das Kapital*, that is, it is an 'abstract' figure (a 'cell', in Marx's words), which potentially contains all the more concrete determinations of totality. The most concrete concept of Gramsci's political theory, i.e. that of an 'integral state' (political society + civil society, coercion + consensus, dictatorship + hegemony and so on), has all its determinations – how to rule, why to obey and so on – already contained in this abstract 'first element', that is, in the relationship between rulers and ruled. As Marx had with the commodity-form, Gramsci showed the historicity of this 'first element': the relationship between rulers and ruled also has its genesis (in class-society) and therefore the possibility of overcoming

3. For a distinction of the method of investigation and the method of presentation, see Marx 1973a, Vol. 23, p. 27.

4. Baratta 2000, p. 108.

5. Gramsci 1975, p. 1752; 1971b, p. 144.

ing it (in a 'self-regulated', classless society, that is, in communism). If one wishes to insist on the comparison with Marx, one can say that the *Notebooks* contain simultaneously the *Grundrisse* (the 'miscellaneous notebooks') and the first drafts of *Das Kapital* (the 'special notebooks').

At first sight, we can say it was the forced withdrawal from political and journalistic activities that allowed Gramsci's prison-works to take on a more systematic, more 'definitive' and more historical-universal nature. It would be a mistake, however, to believe that his prison-works had nothing to do with the historical and political vicissitudes of the time: its new aspect was that now the perspective is broader, related to the historical period, and not just to daily events or to the immediate situation.⁶ Even when he continued to ponder themes already discussed in the pre-prison years, themes that represent a kind of theoretical 'summation' of his direct political experience in the years 1914–26, the historical-universal dimension of his treatment of the subject now presented itself as the rule. It was also from this historical-universal angle that he approached the various political events that continue to happen 'outside', in the outer world, events that certainly – either directly or indirectly – did stimulate the thoughts gathered in the *Notebooks*. Thus we find, between the theoretical formulations of Gramsci before his arrest and those in the *Notebooks*, a dialectical relationship: the prison-reflections, thanks to the '*für ewig*' treatment, brought the systematic elements contained in previous writings to a higher level; but, at the same time, they maintained their historical dimension, their close link with contemporary concrete problems. This overcoming/conservation allowed Gramsci to reach in the *Notebooks* an almost perfect balance between the historical and the systematic moments, the articulation of which is the core of the historical-materialist dialectical method in its most lucid formulations.

We have, therefore, a *reculer pour mieux sauter* (stepping back to take a better jump): Gramsci's withdrawal from immediate political praxis, even if involuntary, resulted in the broadening of his perspectives and in the deepening of the scope of his theoretical work, enabling him to answer and to encompass a wider and more universal praxis. Although he never ceased to be profoundly Italian as a thinker (probably the greater part of the prison-notes is directly about Italy), the Gramsci who appears in the *Notebooks* took on a decisively universal stature: as the English historian Donald Sassoon notes, 'We must highlight that Gramsci does not propose "an Italian path to socialism", but

6. One of the many disputable aspects of Joseph V. Femia's book (Femia 1981, p. 6) is his insistence on the supposedly radical rupture of Gramsci as a 'mature scholar' with the revolutionary 'young Gramsci'.

a “Western” path as opposed to an “Eastern” one’.⁷ If we remember that, for Gramsci, ‘East’ and ‘West’ were not geographical concepts, indicating rather different kinds of socio-economic formations, distinguished by the relative weight of civil society to the state; and if we remember that, for him, ‘Eastern’ formations had a historical tendency to become ‘Western’, as the strengthening of civil society results from historical development itself, then the universal nature of his thought becomes even more evident. Incidentally, this universality will only increase as the necessary process of ‘Westernisation’ of world-societies becomes more acute.

4.2. Gramsci’s place in the evolution of Marxism

Were it possible to summarise in one single question the problem that the *Notebooks* try to solve ‘für ewig’, that is, with an answer of historical-universal value, the question would be as follows: why, in spite of the serious economic crisis and of the apparently revolutionary situation in a large part of Western Europe in the period that immediately followed the First World-War, was it not possible to successfully repeat the victorious experience of the Bolsheviks in Russia? In order to answer this, Gramsci provides us with original developments of some of the basic concepts of Marx, Engels and Lenin. And if, as we believe, the Gramscian renewal of Marx’s and Lenin’s legacy was the most systematic attempt made until now to answer the crucial questions pertaining to the strategy for the transition to socialism in the more developed countries, a transition that remains on the agenda, then its topicality and its centrality become evident: just as it was not possible, in Gramsci’s time, to renew Marxism without creating a primary relationship of dialectical continuity with/overcoming of Lenin’s categorial heritage, neither is it possible to undertake a similar enterprise nowadays, in its necessary aspects, without creating a similar relationship with the work of the author of the *Prison Notebooks*. (It is, perhaps, appropriate to remember that, without a permanent dialectical renewal that follows and responds to the evolution of the real itself, Marxism becomes a collection of dogmas.)

In the first three chapters of this book, we attempted to show how Gramsci’s trajectory until 1926 was dominated by a progressive *assimilation* of the basic ideas of Lenin’s thought. In the three subsequent chapters, as we analyse the key concepts in the *Notebooks*, we will see how they objectively represent a dialectical *overcoming* of many of the basic ideas of the great Russian revolutionary. It is a *dialectical* overcoming, in the sense that the mature Gramsci

7. Sassoon 1980, p. 164.

did not deny every achievement of Leninism, but rather *maintained* its central core, while at the same time *developing* it.⁸ Gramsci could only undertake this 'leap of overcoming' because he had been a Leninist, just as Lenin had to be the most consistent Marxist of his time to be able to renew and update Marx and Engels's legacy on a number of points. Therefore, I think there are two positions that must be excluded in advance, both of which are equally one-sided: 1) that which sees in Gramsci's work an *alternative* to Leninism, that is, a theoretical path that beginning with Marx himself (or maybe with Sorel or Croce) and leading in a direction different or even opposite to Lenin's parallel path; and 2) that which, though correctly acknowledging the essential link between Gramsci and Lenin, minimises the moment of renewal, of dialectical overcoming, of 'going beyond'.

In his theoretical reflections, Gramsci did not see Leninism (or Marxism in general) as a set of closed *definitions*, but as a method for the discovery of new *determinations*;⁹ or, in other words, as a method for making explicit new determinations from the unfolding of the old, which, being dialectical, were determinations necessarily open to historical evolution, and for that reason demanded permanent renewal. Lenin's basic tenets were thus *conserved* (but only in their essential aspects) and *brought to a higher level* (by taking into account new determinations created by socio-historical development). It is clear that there is no other way of being faithful simultaneously to the dialectical method of historical materialism and to the objective dialectics of social reality, since that method is the mental reproduction of those objective dialectics – which is also constituted in itself, ontologically, by the articulation between continuity and renewal.

Lenin did not use any distinct method in his treatment of Marx when he discovered and analysed in *Imperialism* the new determinations brought about by the preponderance of monopolist capital among the capitalist means of production in general. Such discovery and analysis were only possible because Lenin did not break with *Das Kapital's* categorial system (which reproduces the laws of the stage of free competition, laws that reappear, in transfigured form, in the monopolist stage); on the contrary, the system was maintained while being dialectically developed and made more explicit in Lenin's work.

8. Pietro Ingrao summarised Gramsci's relationship with Lenin effectively: 'I believe that, in such positions of Gramsci's, there is already something that not only "selects" certain aspects of Leninism, giving them preference over others, but that also "forces" their meaning and develops them. Gramsci is essential for reconstructing the real story of the workers' movement precisely because he represented the mediation that brought forth an innovation with regard to Lenin, but without abandoning and throwing away the positive legacy contained in Leninism' (Ingrao 1977, p. 245).

9. For a counterposing of the (metaphysical) method of definitions and the (dialectical) method of determinations, see Lukács 1963, 'Preface'.

This dialectical passage, which implies both rupture and continuity, was only possible because the seeds of these new determinations of imperialism systematised by Lenin were already present in Marx's works; one need only think, for instance, of the relationship between the preponderance of monopolies, a central characteristic of Lenin's definition of imperialism, and the tendencies towards the concentration/centralisation of capital, which represent an essential moment in the Marxian law of accumulation. Similarly, the new determinations discovered by Gramsci – the structural difference between the social formations of the 'East' and of the 'West', the extended theory of the state (political society + civil society), the new strategy for socialism in the 'West' (the war of position), and so on – were also *in nuce* present in Lenin's reflections, particularly in the last years of his life (We have already mentioned the analyses that led Lenin to adopt the policy of a 'united front' for the West and to affirm the 'non-classical' nature of the Russian Revolution.)¹⁰

Various authors have analysed the structure of *Das Kapital* as the unfolding of a logical process with a historical-ontological basis, the movement of which consists of elevating the abstract to the concrete, in the transition of simpler (or less complex) determinations to more and more complex (richer, broader) determinations.¹¹ We could even extrapolate and say that the relationship of conservation/overcoming that exists between Marx and Lenin, or between Lenin and Gramsci, presents, *mutatis mutandis*, a similar movement of concretisation. It is clear that the movement that began with contradictory determinations of the commodity and arrived at the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, which can be found in *Das Kapital*, was a movement directed from the abstract to the concrete, from simple totality to complex totality. But it also seems to me that the movement that began with the fall of the rate of profit in *Das Kapital* and reached the processes of monopoly-formation and exportation of capital in *Imperialism* follows a similar course. Both that formation and that exportation are tendencies opposed to the fall in the rate of profit, and we know that Marx considered such countertendencies as determinations intrinsic to the 'law of the tendency to fall' itself.¹² In discovering new countertendencies unknown or inexistent in Marx's time, Lenin ascribed new determinations to the law formulated in *Das Kapital* and thus made it more

10. By this I do not mean that there was no awareness of these new determinations in other Marxists of the time, such as the Austro-Marxists Otto Bauer and Max Adler, who, as regards the process of discovering these determinations, could be placed between Lenin and Gramsci. See Coutinho 2008, pp. 42–9. However, apparently, Gramsci did not come into contact with the Austro-Marxists' work, and this is why his own work of renewal stems directly from Lenin.

11. See, among others, Ilienkov 1961, particularly pp. 93–156.

12. Marx 1973a, Vol. 25, p. 221 ff.

concrete. Therefore, that which is concrete within a given system (the law of the tendency of the fall in the rate of profit within the system of *Das Kapital*) may become a (relatively) abstract moment when it works as a starting-point for another system (that of Lenin's *Imperialism*). We can say that, as Gramsci advanced from the idea that every state is a class-state – an essential idea for Marx's and Lenin's political theory – towards the determination of the ways by which its classist nature is made explicit in the more complex societies of the twentieth-century 'West' (that is, not only through the repressive apparatuses of the state, but through an articulation of these apparatuses and the 'private apparatuses of hegemony', that is between political society and civil society), he was similarly moving from the abstract to the concrete.

In order to avoid any misunderstandings, it is important to remember that the transition from the abstract to the concrete (or from a less concrete system to a more concrete one) is not a merely, or even primarily, gnoseological movement, relative to the deepening of knowledge; it is, rather, a historical-ontological movement, to the extent that it is reality itself, in its development, that realises the movement of this transition, for instance, from the simple mercantile means of production, through competitive capitalism, to monopoly-capitalism; or from a state in which the element of 'coercion' dominates, and civil society is weak and formless, to a state that balances coercion and hegemony, domination and leadership. In other words, ontologically, in historical becoming, the more simple (more abstract) determinations are re-stated and transfigured in the more complex (more concrete) determinations. In this sense, if novelty must not obscure continuity, continuity, in its turn, must not minimise novelty. That is why we insist on the dialectical nature – conservation/renewal – of the link between Gramsci and Lenin and, through Lenin, between Gramsci and Marx.

One should not suppose, however, the process of concretisation between the categorial systems of different thinkers to be a linear and uninterrupted process. Just as there are elements in Marx's thought that were not kept and overcome by Lenin, or even assimilated (one need only think of the category of alienation), Gramsci's absorption of Marx and Lenin leaves aside key elements from the works of both authors. The most outstanding example is the absence, in Gramsci's work, of a more accurate dialectical development of Marx's and Lenin's analyses of the economic transformations undergone by capitalism. It would, certainly, be a mistake to ignore the various suggestive indications Gramsci makes on the topic, mostly to be found in the famous *Notebook 22*, dedicated to the theme 'Americanism and Fordism'; one need only remember his description of Fordism as a countertendency to the fall in the rate of profit, as well as his perception of Fascist corporatism as a means of introducing a partial state-regulation (imposed by the worsening of the crises

of realisation) of the capitalist economy.¹³ The fact remains that these remarks, however brilliant, did not reach in Gramsci the same historical-universal status of a theoretical synthesis as did his reflections on the contemporary state: in vain would we search his work for an exhaustive description of the political economy particular to mature or 'late' capitalism.¹⁴ Besides, it is also possible to detect in Gramsci the presence of philosophical formulations that, although overcoming many of the one-sided propositions of *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, still sit below the categorial wealth of the materialist dialectics outlined by Lenin in the *Philosophical Notebooks* (it is certain that Gramsci never knew of them). To conclude, I think the exact point in Gramsci's mature work where the movement of dialectical renewal of the 'classics' dwells is the field of *political theory*.

4.3. Gramsci as a critic of politics

Gramsci was probably the only Marxist of his period to talk about 'political science' or a 'science of politics' in a positive way. While the word 'sociology' always appears in the *Notebooks* with strongly negative overtones (Gramsci's aversion to the 'Marxist sociology' proposed by Bukharin and by the formalism and empiricism of 'bourgeois sociology' is well-known), the phrase 'political science' has, by contrast, an undisputed positive connotation. It is not difficult to see that one of the goals of the *Notebooks*, and possibly the one to which Gramsci felt most strongly committed, was the creation of a 'science of politics' adequate to the philosophy of praxis, that is, Marxism. One of the tasks that must be undertaken by Gramscian scholars is, therefore, to try to understand the causes and the consequences of Gramsci's positive use of the phrase 'political science', especially as it is well-known that Gramsci, being a Marxist, placed himself above the false academic division of intellectual labour prevalent in his time and in ours, and in his investigations adopted 'the point of view of the totality', the exact methodological approach that, according to the young Lukács, provides a radical distinction between Marxism and 'bourgeois science'.¹⁵

13. See Gramsci 1975, p. 2137 ff.; 1971b, pp. 277–318.

14. Hobsbawm's restriction, to that extent, seems fair: 'Everyone, with the possible exception of the economist, will find something illuminating in the *Notebooks*'. (Hobsbawm 1975, p. 16) Enzo Santarelli generalises this weakness in economic reflection to all Italian Marxism; he speaks of 'the absence of autonomous economic thought, something almost unbelievable in an authentic Marxist tradition; to summarise, the moment of politico-philosophical elaboration clearly prevails in Italian Marxist thought, as we can see from the work of its greatest exponents.' (Santarelli 1977, p. 28.)

15. Lukács 1971, p. 41.

I believe that Gramsci's positive evaluation of the phrase 'political science' came mainly from his purported anti-economism, which led him to repudiate not only the interpretations of Marxism more common at the time of the Second International, but also, and maybe more intensely, those of the so-called 'Soviet Marxism' well-represented by Bukharin, one of the main objects of polemic in the *Notebooks*. Gramsci's effort to affirm the creative role of praxis in human history, and his perception of the 'relations of force' as the constituting moment of social being, led him to emphasise the study of political phenomena in their various determinations. On the other hand, one of the main reasons for Gramsci's ongoing interest in Lenin's theoretical and practical work was the importance the Russian revolutionary ascribed to politics. Gramsci's interest was so great that he even went so far as to ignore or undermine the undeniable points of rupture between his thought and that of the author of *The State and Revolution*. Finally, one should not forget that the analysis of politics has always been among the most fruitful contributions of Italian thought to the theory of society, a lineage that, in spite of many differences, goes from Machiavelli and Vico to Mosca and Croce. We know well the degree to which Gramsci was connected to the 'national terrain' of his country's culture, even if his thought is undeniably universal.

Whatever the reasons that led Gramsci to evaluate the 'science of politics' positively, the fact remains that his work, even though it discussing several themes that today can be classified as philosophical, anthropological, sociological, aesthetic, and so on was mostly focused on the discussion of action and political institutions (hegemony, collective will, state, civil society, political parties and so on). Gramsci effectively examined all spheres of social being, starting from their relationship with politics. All the notebooks are filled with references to the fact that 'everything is politics', be it philosophy, history, culture or even praxis in general. In this sense, the following statement by Brazilian Catholic philosopher A.R. Buzzi is, I believe, a fair one: 'Politics is the central core of Gramsci's thought, providing the meaning and articulation of all his historical investigations and philosophical reflections'.¹⁶

In the *Notebooks*, we find the word 'politics' applied in two senses, which we could call 'broad' and 'strict'. In the broad sense, politics is identified with liberty, with universality, or, more precisely, with all forms of praxis that go beyond the mere passive reception or the manipulation of immediate facts from reality (reception and manipulation are features of a large part of technico-economic praxis and of daily praxis in general), and that are, on the contrary, consciously directed to the totality of objective and subjective

16. Buzzi 1967, p. 187.

relations. As it corresponds to ontologico-social reality, this understanding allows us to agree with Gramsci that politics extends throughout all spheres of social being, that is, to say that politics is present in all of them either as an actual or potential element that cannot be eliminated. We can understand this formulation better if we note that, in this broad sense, 'politics' is, in Gramsci, synonymous with 'catharsis' as he defined it in the *Notebooks*:

The term 'catharsis' can be employed to indicate the passage from the purely economic (or egoistic-passional) to the ethico-political moment, that is the superior elaboration of the structure into superstructure in the minds of men. This also means the passage from 'objective to subjective' and from 'necessity to freedom'. Structure ceases to be an external force which crushes man, assimilates him to itself and makes him passive; and is transformed into a means of freedom, an instrument to create a new ethico-political form and a source of new initiatives. To establish the 'cathartic' moment becomes therefore, it seems to me, the starting-point for all the philosophy of praxis, and the cathartic process coincides with the chain of syntheses which have resulted from the evolution of the dialectic.¹⁷

Here, we have a clear indication of the moment of the passage from economic determinism to political freedom. For instance, we can find an emblematic manifestation of 'catharsis' in the process by which a class overcomes its immediate economico-corporatist interests to rise to a universal, ethico-political level, which is at the source of 'new initiatives'. In other words, we could call 'cathartic' the moment when a class, thanks to the creation of a collective will, stops being a mere economic phenomenon, instead becoming a self-conscious subject of history. This is the Gramscian equivalent of Marx's passage from the 'class in itself' to the 'class for itself', or of Lenin's elevation of trade-union consciousness to politico-universal consciousness. According to Gramsci, if a social class is unable to achieve this 'catharsis', it cannot become a *national* class, that is, it cannot represent the universal interests of a social bloc, and, therefore, cannot achieve *hegemony* in society.

However, the dialectics of class-consciousness are certainly not the only sense of Gramsci's concept of 'catharsis', that is, of 'politics' in the broader sense. It is ontologically correct to say that *all forms of praxis*, even those without a direct relationship with the formation of the consciousness and of the action of social classes, contain the potential for a 'cathartic' moment, that is, for the passage from the sphere of immediate manipulation – the passive reception of reality – to the sphere of totality, of active transformation of the social world, or, in other words, to go from the (merely particular) 'egoistic-

17. Gramsci 1975, p. 1244; 1971b, pp. 366–7.

passional' conscience to the 'ethico-political' or universal consciousness (the consciousness of our participation in the human species).¹⁸ In the *Notebooks*, Gramsci gave numerous examples of the 'cathartic moment' in many spheres of social being, from ideology (the passage from heterogeneous and folkloric common sense to good critical sense and/or to an organic conception of the world, as in the 'systematic philosophy of philosopher') to art and literature (the creation of a 'national-popular' perspective that is truly universal-concrete, and no longer provincial or abstractly 'cosmopolitan'), and so on.

The most significant thing, here, is to underline that Gramsci saw the manifestation of such a 'cathartic moment' even in the interior of political praxis itself as understood in its 'strict' sense. Gramsci made an important categorical distinction when he distinguished 'grand politics', which comprises 'the founding of new states, the struggle for the destruction, the defence, and the preservation of determinate socio-economic structures', from 'small politics' (comprising 'everyday, parliamentary issues, the politics of the corridor, of intrigue'), which corresponds to 'those partial, everyday issues that present themselves within a structure that is already established'.¹⁹

'Small politics' could easily be identified with passive, manipulative praxis, which suffers determinism instead of confronting it, whereas 'grand politics' – which, as in Machiavelli's conception, aims 'to create a new balance of forces and therefore cannot help concerning himself with what "ought to be" (not of course in a moralistic sense)'²⁰ – is the moment of the affirmation of teleology and freedom. In this sense, we can say that Gramsci's alleged 'panpoliticism' is nothing but the *dialectical* and *materialist* perception of an essential ontological characteristic of social being, that is, of the fact that this particular mode of being results from the articulation of determinism and freedom, causality and teleology (or 'ought to be').²¹

As we have said, besides introducing politics in a 'broad' sense, Gramsci also spoke in the *Notebooks* of a 'narrow' sense proper to 'political science', a concept that involves the set of practices and objectifications connected with the relations of power between rulers and ruled. If, in its broadest sense – that is, as catharsis – Gramsci saw politics as an ineliminable and constituting moment of the ontological structure of social being itself, in the second sense politics instead appears as something *historically transitory*. Or, in other

18. The concept of 'catharsis', used in the same sense of an elevation from singularity to universality, but limited to the spheres of ethics and aesthetics, played a decisive role in Lukács 1963, Chapter Ten.

19. Gramsci 1975, pp. 1563–4.

20. Gramsci 1975, p. 1577; 1971b, p. 172.

21. My usage of ontological concepts in the present work is always based on Lukács 1976–81, a fundamental work.

words, Gramsci was not a 'politologist' (and much less a 'politologist' with politicist deviations), but a *critic of politics*. And that in the same sense that Marx was not an 'economist' (and much less 'economistic'), but a *critic of political economy*.

It is well-known that Marx studied the laws of capital not only to determine their immanent connection, their synchronic-systematic structure, but, what is more important, also to demonstrate that such a structure is not something natural and eternal, as economists usually believe, but rather a social formation with a historical genesis (that is, with non-capitalist moments which are fed back as structural moments of the reproduction of capital itself) and that it entails contradictions that point to its equally historical overcoming. Thus, Marx's use of the phrase '*critique of political economy*' (which is very common in his theoretical works) has a precise meaning: Marx borrowed from 'classical' political economy (especially from Smith and Ricardo) more than a few concepts, although subjecting them to an ontological critique, that is, relating them to social totality, on the one hand, and to historical becoming, on the other.²² These concepts from 'economic science' thus become, in Marx's work, the constituting parts of another theoretical system, in which the laws of capital lose their fetishistically 'natural' character to become moments in a historical process; that is, they appear as the result of human action and, therefore, can be overcome by the same action.

Gramsci, following the path indicated by Marx, took a similar position regarding so-called 'political science'. Just as Marx acknowledged the concepts of commodity and value (created by the political economy that came before him) as starting-points of his own reflection, Gramsci also knew that in the sphere of praxis and political institutions – according to lessons from theoreticians ranging from Machiavelli to Gaetano Mosca –

the first element is that there really do exist rulers and ruled, leaders and led. The entire science and art of politics are based on this primordial, and (given certain general conditions) irreducible fact.²³

However, he treats the 'first element' of politics in the same way as Marx treats the laws of capital: for him, we are not looking at a 'natural' or 'eternal' fact. The author of the *Notebooks* writes:

The basic innovation introduced by the philosophy of praxis into the science of politics and of history is the demonstration that there is no abstract 'human nature', fixed and immutable (a concept which certainly derives

22. On the concept of 'ontological critique', see Lukács 1976–81, Vol. 1, pp. 283–319; 1978, pp. 25–68.

23. Gramsci 1975, p. 1752; 1971b, p. 144.

from religious and transcendentalist thought), but that human nature is the totality of historically determined social relations, hence an historical fact which can, within certain limits, be ascertained with the methods of philology and criticism. Consequently political science, as far as both its concrete content and its logical formulation are concerned, must be seen as a developing organism.²⁴

This historicist point of view led Gramsci to dialectise his 'first element' (which nevertheless continues to be the starting-point for his specific construction of 'political science') and, as a consequence, to pose the following questions, all of crucial methodological importance:

...is it the intention that there should always be rulers and ruled, or is the objective to create the conditions in which this division is no longer necessary? In other words, is the initial premise the perpetual division of the human race, or the belief that this division is only an historical fact, corresponding to certain conditions?²⁵

Since Gramsci, without doubt, is adopting the second alternative indicated in the questions, it becomes evident that, for him, the 'first element' of politics (much as Marx had his first 'cell' in commodity and its value-form) is not a natural and eternal fact, but a historical phenomenon.²⁶

The historicity of politics, therefore, when conceived as a 'developing organism', is not restricted to its structural-immanent categories: according to Gramsci, it is the political sphere itself (in its narrow sense, that is, as a relation between rulers and ruled) that possesses a historical nature.²⁷ This sphere has a *historical genesis*, as politics only exists when there are rulers and ruled, a distinction stemming not from 'human nature', but from historical-concrete social relations. Gramsci wrote, 'in the last analysis...it has its origin in a

24. Gramsci 1975, pp. 1598–9; 1971b, pp. 133–4.

25. Gramsci 1975, p. 1752; 1971b, p. 144.

26. This historicist position leaves no doubt as to the fact that Gramsci distanced himself from the 'political science' of his time – from that created by G. Mosca, for instance – in the same radical manner that Marx distanced himself from the political economy of Smith and Ricardo. Thus I deem unjustifiable the position of an American scholar who, intending to defend the indefensible hypothesis that 'Gramsci's political theory largely amounts to constructive criticism or to a critical development of Mosca's theory', correctly states that 'Mosca seems to theorise eternity and the immutability of this fact [the division between rulers and ruled], whereas Gramsci seems to take the opposite for granted', only then to jump to the conclusion that 'maybe this difference is merely superficial' (Finocchiaro 1994, pp. 114 and 120; see also Finocchiaro 1999).

27. As we have seen, Gramsci did not reduce politics to this 'narrow' dimension, and also sees it as 'catharsis'. It could be said that in its 'cathartic' dimension politics was seen by Gramsci as the privileged moment of consensual intersubjective interaction among men and, as a consequence, as an ineliminable part of the ontology of the social being. On this, see Appendix One below.

division between social groups',²⁸ that is, to the class-division of society. For Gramsci, such division has not always existed and will not always exist, since it may disappear in 'regulated society' (the name Gramsci invented for 'communism'), in which the division of society among antagonistic classes will be overcome. Indeed, when he speaks of politics in communism, Gramsci saw

the coercive element of the State withering away by degrees, as ever-more conspicuous elements of regulated society (or ethical State or civil society) make their appearance.²⁹

For him, this clearly implied the overcoming of the division between rulers and ruled: so, when he criticised the transformation of 'statolatry' in 'theoretical fanaticism' and in something perpetual – a clear reference to Stalinism – he counterposed 'statolatry' to building

a complex and well-articulated civil society, in which the individual can govern himself without his *self-government* thereby entering into conflict with political society.³⁰

The 'self-government' mentioned here points precisely to the overcoming of the division between rulers and ruled.

According to Marx, communist society should eliminate the reified autonomy of the economic sphere, meaning that its spontaneous and anarchic laws (the laws of the market) will be subjected to conscious control and planning by the associated producers. In an analogous manner, Gramsci believed that communism is characterised by the fact that civil society (or the ethical state) will absorb the coercive element of the state, as the functions performed by the latter will be transferred to the conscious and consensual relations of civil society, thus giving way to a 'self-government'. In both cases, the communist proposal is clear: consensus must rule where coercion once did. Therefore, if Marx did not believe in the 'classic' or 'vulgar' theories' *homo oeconomicus*, whose actions would be guided by a 'calculating' cost-benefit logic, neither did Gramsci believe in the 'natural' existence of a *homo politicus*, whose main characteristic – according to bourgeois 'political science', from Hobbes to Weber – would be an innate 'will to power' or 'to prestige'.

The alleged 'politicism' many scholars ascribe to Gramsci therefore has no basis in the texts of the *Notebooks*. When Gramsci saw politics in the broad sense, as 'catharsis', it was for him an ineliminable determination of human praxis. So, when Gramsci says that 'everything is politics', as he often does

28. Gramsci 1975, p. 1752; 1971b, p. 144.

29. Gramsci 1975, p. 764; 1971b, p. 263.

30. Gramsci 1975, p. 1020; 1971b, pp. 268–9.

in the *Notebooks*, he is not violating the real, but just the opposite: he is indicating an essential aspect of social being, that is, the moment of articulation between subjectivity and objectivity, between singularity and universality. When he discussed politics in its narrow sense, as a power-relation between rulers and ruled (with all its consequences) – that is, in the way ‘political science’ sees it, in his time and in ours – Gramsci showed it to be something to be dialectically overcome (conserved, eliminated, brought to a higher level) in ‘regulated society’, that is, communism. That is why we can say Gramsci was not a ‘political scientist’, a ‘politologist’, but rather, in a strong Marxian sense, a *critic* not only of politics as a relation between rulers and ruled, but also of ‘political science’ as modernity has conceptualised it.

4.4. On the relations between politics, economics and social totality

Gramsci subjected ‘political science’ to an ontological critique. That not only meant historicising it, but, as a consequence, also relating it to social totality. The adoption of the ‘point of view of the totality’ also meant that he did not underestimate the issue – which is decisive for Marxism – of the relations between politics and economics, or, in other words, between superstructure and structure. I believe it is incorrect to affirm, as many students of Gramsci do, that he placed politics above economics, that is, that he inverted the ontological priority of structure over superstructure, as established by Marx and Engels.³¹

However, in order to avoid misunderstandings, it is first and foremost necessary to define precisely what Gramsci means, following in the footsteps of Marx, by ‘economics’. He understood well the lesson from Engels, who, reviewing a book by Marx, said:

Economics is not concerned with *things* but with relations between *persons*, and in the final analysis between classes; these relations however are always bound to *things* and appear as *things*.³²

Thus Gramsci strongly rejected the reduction of economics to the technical relations of production. Bukharin and Loria (among others) were guilty of such a reduction, and for that they were harshly criticised in the *Notebooks*. For Gramsci, the economic structure is not merely the sphere of the production of

31. On the concept of ‘ontological priority’, see Lukács 1976–81, Vol. 1, pp. 261–320; 1978, pp. 1–69.

32. Engels 1980.

material objects, of things, but rather the way men establish their 'metabolism' with nature, producing and reproducing not only these material objects, but above all their own global social relations. Attacking Bukharin's economistic positions, which, incidentally, were shared by so-called 'Marxism-Leninism' as a whole, Gramsci wrote,

The notion of the 'technical instrument' in the *Popular Manual* [by Bukharin] is completely mistaken...[I]t seems that Loria was the first person who arbitrarily...put the expression 'technical instrument' in the place of 'material forces of production' or 'complex of social relations'.³³

Thus we can see that Gramsci identified the economic structure with the 'complex of social relations', that is, the totality. But, distancing himself from Hegel and, once again, following in the footsteps of Marx, Gramsci's dialectic is not idealist, but rather materialist: he knew that totality is not exhausted in the reciprocal action of its various moments, as Hegel imagined, but that it always contains, besides this reciprocal action, that which Marx, when speaking of the relation between consumption and production in the 'Introduction' to the *Grundrisse*, called the *übergreifendes Moment*, the 'predominant moment':

Structures and superstructures form an 'historical bloc'. That is to say the complex, contradictory and discordant ensemble of the superstructures is the reflection of the ensemble of the social relations of production.³⁴

Thus we see that, for Gramsci, the 'predominant moment' in historical totality is the 'ensemble of social relations of production' itself, of which the 'ensemble of the superstructures' would be the 'the reflection'. (Gramsci was nevertheless aware that this 'reflection' is not a mere epiphenomenon, but something with an ontologico-social density: indeed, there are many passages in the *Notebooks* in which he spoke of the 'solidity' of ideologies.)³⁵

The ontological priority of structure manifests itself not only in Gramsci's many concrete analyses (one need only recall, for instance, his thoughts on the *Risorgimento* and on 'Americanism'), but also in a paragraph that contains one of the main methodological paradigms of Gramscian 'political science', the famous Note §17 from *Notebook 13*, on the 'Analysis of Situations. Relations of Force'. In this paragraph, Gramsci begins with the establishment of the *objective* conditions of such a relation of forces, which, at this first (eco-

33. Gramsci 1975, p. 1439; 1971b, pp. 458–9.

34. Gramsci 1975, p. 1051; 1971b, p. 366. On the 'predominant moment', see Marx 1986; and Lukács 1976–81, vol. 1, p. 314 ff.; 1978, p. 65 ff.

35. See, for example, Gramsci 1975, p. 1400.

monic) level, appears 'closely linked to the structure, objective, independent of human will, and which can be measured with the systems of the exact or physical sciences'.³⁶ Only later is it possible to analyse the specifically political relation of social forces, in which *subjective* factors play – within the framework of objective relations – a decisive role: at this level, what matters is

the degree of homogeneity, self-awareness, and organisation attained by the various social classes. This moment can in its turn be analysed and differentiated into various levels, corresponding to the various moments of collective political consciousness.³⁷

And these levels always, according to Gramsci, go from the 'economico-corporatist' phase to the more 'strictly political' one.

Furthermore, if we look at the conclusion of the passage on catharsis (the first part of which was mentioned above), we can understand that, for Gramsci, political action takes place within the context of determinations created by the structure:

The cathartic process coincides with the chain of syntheses which have resulted from the evolution of the dialectic. (Let us recall the two points around which the process revolves: no society places upon itself tasks for the solution of which the necessary and sufficient conditions do not exist, or are not about to exist; and no society ceases to exist before expressing all its potential content.).³⁸

In other words, the 'cathartic' moment – the moment of freedom, of teleology, of ought to be, of the subjects' initiative, *or, in sum, the moment of politics* – is not an absolute creation, it does not operate in a vacuum, but in the interior of the economico-objective determinations which restrict (without at all eliminating) the margins for the realisation of freedom.³⁹ As in the classics

36. Gramsci 1975, p. 1583; 1971b, p. 180. Gramsci here clearly alludes to Marx 1859, where Marx speaks of 'the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science'.

37. Gramsci 1975, pp. 1583–4; 1971b, p. 181.

38. Gramsci 1975, p. 1244; 1971b, p. 367. There is also here an evident reference to Marx's 'Preface'.

39. The dialectical relationship between objectivity and subjectivity manifests itself very clearly in the treatment of one of the main concepts of Gramsci's philosophico-political theory, the concept of 'will'. 'To escape simultaneously from solipsism and from mechanistic conceptions implicit in the concept of thought as a receptive and ordering activity, it is necessary to pose the question in an "historicist" fashion, and at the same time to place "will" (which in the last analysis equals practical or political activity) at the base of philosophy. But it must be a rational, not an arbitrary, will, which is realised in so far as it corresponds to objective historical necessities, or in so far as it is universal history itself in the moment of its progressive actualisation'.

of historical materialism, in Gramsci, too, economics determines politics not by a mechanical imposition of unambiguous, ineluctable results, but rather defining the context of the alternatives that present themselves, in every concrete opportunity, to the subjects' action.

On the one hand, the ontological priority of structure is reaffirmed by Gramsci as regards politics in the broad sense, that is, 'catharsis', which is presented as a teleological position that starts with causality in order to carry out 'the passage from "objective to subjective" and from "necessity to freedom."' On the other hand, it is also reaffirmed as regards politics in the narrow sense: not only does the analysis of the relations of force (perhaps the central point of Gramsci's 'political science') begin with the establishment of the economic conditions, but we could also even say that the whole sphere of politics, which has its 'first element' in the division between rulers and ruled, 'ultimately' depends on structural, economic determinations. Indeed, the genesis of this 'first element' goes back to the division of society into antagonistic classes, a division created by economy understood as 'the ensemble of social relations' – therefore, as a sphere comprising not just the 'productive forces', but also the 'social relations of production' – that is, to borrow terms from Habermas, comprising not just 'labour' but also 'interaction'.⁴⁰

Still, in the domain of the relations between politics and economics, I believe it is possible to point out another important contribution Gramsci made to the ontology of social being and, more specifically, to the 'political science' of Marxism. As is well-known, Marx insisted on the fact that the process of the socialisation of production, as it shortened the socially-necessary time of work, implied at the same time 'a withdrawal of natural barriers', that is, an expansion of the space of human freedom in the face of (in spite of everything) impossible-to-eliminate natural determinations.⁴¹ We can also say that the socialisation of production, as it shortened the working day and brought together vast agglomerations of humans, lay at the foundation of the processes of the socialisation of political participation, that is, of the creation of a large number of collective political subjects – processes which are the very material basis of 'civil society', as Gramsci called it. This means that, if the process of socialisation of labour and economic production corresponds to a tendency towards the 'withdrawal of natural barriers', that is, towards a

(Gramsci 1975, p. 1485; 1971b, pp. 345–6). For an interesting analysis of 'will' in the *Notebooks*, see Medici 2000, pp. 61–109.

40. See, for example, Habermas 1968. Now is not the time to examine the difference between Habermas's dualistic view and the dialectical-unitarian position of Marxism in the face of these two modes of praxis.

41. Lukács 1976–81, p. 321 ff.; 1978, p. 69 ff.

greater autonomy of human praxis in the face of coercion by natural laws, then, by analogy, stemming from the socialisation of politics, we could say that we find a 'withdrawal of economic barriers', that is, greater autonomy and influence of politics (the complex of superstructures) over the totality of social life. The greater the socialisation of politics, the more civil society develops, meaning that social processes are more and more determined by teleology (by 'collective will') and the automatic causality of economy becomes less and less coercive.⁴²

Gramsci understood this historical-ontological process very well. It is at the basis of one of the highest points in his 'political science', that is the formulation of a specific strategy for the transition to socialism in the more complex or 'Western' societies. As early as 1926, a year before his imprisonment, Gramsci noted, 'in the advanced capitalist countries, the ruling class possesses political and organizational reserves which it did not possess, for instance, in Russia. This means that even the most serious economic crises do not have immediate repercussions in the political sphere'.⁴³ In the *Notebooks*, when the recently-formulated concept of 'civil society' allowed him to make the 1926 formulation more concrete, Gramsci attacked the economism of Rosa Luxemburg, observing that, 'at least in the case of the most advanced states, where "civil society" has become a very complex structure and one which is resistant to the catastrophic "incursions" of the immediate economic element (for instance, crises and depressions). The superstructures of civil society are like the trench-systems of modern warfare'.⁴⁴

Therefore, contradicting the assumptions of economistic Marxism, the way by which economics and politics relate to each other is not a given that stands once and for all: the mode of articulation between the two spheres, the role of 'predominant moment' one plays over the other in the bosom of the totality of social being depends on the concrete features of the social formation concerned, and as such we face a historically-changeable relationship. If men in a primitive society are completely helpless in the face of some natural catastrophe (such as a drought or a flood), the same is not necessarily true of a more evolved society, in which the development of productive forces and technique creates a 'withdrawal of natural barriers'. As an analogy, we can say like

42. For Lukács, and certainly for Gramsci as well, such a development finds its greatest expression in communism: 'In the growth of socialist humanity, the essentially new is that the evolution of economy will be henceforth governed by a universal teleology. This teleology, not to be defined as a causal-objective law, must be understood as a human subjective-conscious design for the species self-determination of social development' (Lukács 1991, p. 99).

43. Gramsci 1971a, p. 121; 1990b, p. 400.

44. Gramsci 1975, p. 1615; 1971b, p. 235.

Gramsci that the economy does not have a similar role in formations in which civil society is 'primordial and gelatinous',⁴⁵ that is, the East, and in those in which there is 'a proper relation between state and civil society', namely, the West. Whereas in the former men are more atomised and thus oriented by 'egoistic-passional' spontaneity – therefore, more vulnerable to the direct influence of economic facts – in the latter, the presence of a developed civil society – placing itself as a conscious mediator between the economic sphere and state institutions strictly-speaking – creates, on the contrary, a series of trenches and fortresses between economics and politics, or, in other words, it brings a 'withdrawal of the economic barriers'.

The correct ontological relationship established by Gramsci between economics and politics did not only allow an adequate methodical basis for his various concrete analyses of fundamental moments of social totality. It also represents a development of the general principals of historical materialism. It is true that, in contrast with many of their epigones, the 'founders of the philosophy of praxis' almost always indicated *mediations* between economics and politics, rejecting mechanistic readings based on the primacy of economics; but it is true just the same that they did not *systematically* develop the form by which these mediations are historically determined, that is, how they undergo modifications (either weaker or more complex) according to the concrete characteristics of each determinate social formation, or, more precisely, in the case of modern societies, according to the greater or smaller degree of the socialisation of politics and the autonomy and complexity of the civil society. Here, we stand before a new and important theoretical discovery by Gramsci, one among his many contributions to the 'political science' of the philosophy of praxis. We could even conclude that, in the *Notebooks*, we find the clearest elaboration of a Marxist ontology of political praxis.

4.5. Gramsci's philosophical conceptions

As has perhaps been anticipated, Gramsci's specifically philosophical reflections, which take up a large part of the *Notebooks*, also stemmed from the 'focal point' of political praxis. Such 'politicism', on the one hand, allowed him to produce a fruitful theory of the ontological character of conscience and its role in social life, and on the other hand lets him slide into certain idealist positions when addressing particular philosophical issues. This idealism appears in a few observations by Gramsci on questions related to the theory of knowledge (to gnoseology), and to the ontology of nature,

45. Gramsci 1975, p. 866; 1971b, p. 238.

but without essentially reaching its ontologico-social implications. Rightly rejecting a determinist and fatalist 'reading' of Marxism that denies the role of the subject (of praxis) in the formation of social objectivity, Gramsci – here approaching a Marxist trend among whose exponents were the young Lukács and Karl Korsch – ended up, in practice, denying a specific kind of knowledge: scientific knowledge, the main task of which is to *reflect* reality and its alternatives in the most objective manner possible, that is, avoiding any projections from 'alien additions' (Engels) by the knowing individual onto the reality she intends to know.

The fact, however, that science should be deanthropomorphising, that is, that it should attempt to capture objects without projecting on them elements from the knower,⁴⁶ does not mean in any way that the knower herself is not ontologically a part of the objective structure of the social being that science tries to recreate. Vulgar, mechanistic materialism, which so often presents itself as authentic Marxism, leaves aside the second aspect of the question: as it generalises to the ontological (acting) subject something that is valid only for the gnoseological (knowing) subject, it eliminates the active role of the subject in general in the construction of social life, stating that man is restricted to reflect and to record a reality that happens independently of his will. (Such is the position expressed in Bukharin's *Manual*, so harshly criticised by Gramsci in the *Notebooks*.) But the trend that we would call 'historicist', in which Gramsci consciously included himself (one only needs to remember how frequently he defined Marxism as 'absolute historicism', 'responsible historicism', 'integral historicism', and so on), usually falls into the opposite one-sidedness. While it correctly affirms the unbreakable link between knowledge and praxis and the necessary historical conditioning of all knowledge, this trend identifies knowledge in general with ideology, thus denying the possibility of an objective (scientific) representation of the real: if man is part of the objective process of social reality, then, according to this trend, all knowledge about the real will necessarily be ideological, that is, it will not so much reflect something that exists outside of the consciousness and of the will of the knowing individual, but rather the aspirations and projects of the active subject.

Actually, even though the gnoseological relationship does not exhaust in any way the link between subject and object (a belief apparently held by vulgar materialism), there is no incompatibility between the possibility of science (of objective knowledge) and the ubiquitous reality of praxis (of teleological acting). On the contrary, the need for scientific knowledge – knowledge that illuminates the causal (objective) nexuses on which teleology

46. On the 'deanthropomorphising' nature of science, see Lukács 1963, Chapter Two.

(the subject's initiative) will operate – stems from the nature of praxis itself, and is demanded by it. Primitive man needs to work – to hunt, for instance – effectively, and therefore he needs to choose the appropriate kind of rock, considering its objective properties (for instance, hardness) to build his axe. In this simple form of praxis, we find the possibility and the need for science. Another example – Marx needs to properly describe the praxis of the proletariat in its struggle for emancipation: therefore, he objectively studies, as a 'process of natural science',⁴⁷ the laws of production and reproduction of capital. The fact that the theoretical results obtained by Marx later became ideology, a conception of the world, and determinant moments in the praxis of millions and millions of men, does not in any way negate the objective and scientific nature of those results. Besides, the more scientific and objective a piece of knowledge is, the more it will tend to make the praxis it illuminates more effective, universal and widespread.

The organic nexus – *at the ontological level* – between science and ideology, knowledge and praxis, does not cause the discoveries of science, including social science, to lose their objectivity: the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall is as objective as the law of gravity, even if, as opposed to the first, the latter results from countless teleological (subjective), particular projects, and can be altered (if the capitalist system as a whole is altered) by the action of a collective, organised human subject. Therefore, Gramsci was apparently not following authentic Marxism when he affirmed that 'the philosophy of praxis is itself a superstructure',⁴⁸ that is, an ideology, distinguished from 'other ideologies' only by its more lasting and less temporary nature. On the contrary, what is peculiar to Marxism is that it is a science that, *simultaneously and consciously*, offers a foundation for the construction of an ideology, a conception of the world, a political praxis.

Gramsci did not, however, deny the character of a science, namely, of objective knowledge of the real, to Marxism alone. He wrote, 'But in actual fact science [including natural science] too is a superstructure, an ideology'.⁴⁹ This problematic statement is a consequence of Gramsci's own conception of objectivity: to affirm the existence of an objective reality, independent of the *knowing* subject is, for him, a manifestation of vulgar materialism, of the mechanistic, and even of mysticism. He said:

The idea of 'objective' in metaphysical materialism would appear to mean an objectivity that exists even apart from man; but when one affirms that a

47. Marx 1973a, vol. 23, p. 15.

48. Gramsci 1975, p. 1457; 1995, p. 395.

49. Gramsci 1975, pp. 1415–16; 1995, p. 293.

reality would exist even if man did not, one is either speaking metaphorically or one is falling into a form of mysticism.⁵⁰

Besides, we can see that Gramsci made no distinction between the notion of objectivation (the creations of the collective subject in the sphere of social being, which possess – just as in the case of the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall – a peculiar kind of objectivity) and the notion of objectivity in general (the objectivity, for instance, of a law or of a natural fact). For him, all objectivity can be identified, even if through mediations, with human subjectivity: to this extent, his refusal of ‘materialist’ positivism was followed, as in his youth, by traces of an idealist tendency.

Objective always means ‘humanly objective’ which can be held to correspond exactly to ‘historically subjective’: in other words, objective would mean ‘universal subjective’.⁵¹

This position makes it difficult not only to explain the objectivity of the law of gravity before all men knew about it, before it became a ‘universal subjective’, but even to grasp the objectivity of social facts: does the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall (even if it is a human objectivation, and objectively natural) need to wait to become a ‘universal subjective’ in order to be an objective, ontologico-social reality, which harshly affects people who have never heard of it, and determines their behaviour?

In sum, in the case of his philosophical conceptions, the concentration on the ‘focal point’ of politics led Gramsci into two errors of idealist origin: 1) Not to distinguish gnoseologically between science and ideology, objective knowledge and ‘interested’ consciousness, and the consequence of transforming all human knowledge (even natural science) in an expression of a historically-conditioned class or group subjectivity; and 2) To treat historical-social objectivation and natural objectivity as equivalent. This leads him to introduce a strongly idealist element into his occasional observations on the ontology of nature. That is why, in his subjectivation of objectivity, Gramsci did not relent even when considering physical matter:

Matter as such is not our subject but how it is socially and historically organised for production, and natural science should be seen correspondingly as essentially an historical category, a human relation.⁵²

50. Gramsci 1975, p. 1437; 1971b, p. 446.

51. Gramsci, 1975, p. 1437; 1971b, p. 445.

52. Gramsci 1975, p. 1442; 1971b, pp. 465–6. Incidentally, it is interesting to note that, in a passage not included in the first thematic edition of the *Notebooks*, Gramsci extended to Engels a few of the objections he had made to Bukharin’s

This final limitation of Gramsci's epistemological positions has as its source an insufficient development of his social ontology. His work was so concentrated on the 'focal point' of politics that he did not prove himself able to systematically distinguish the two essential modes of human praxis, 'labour' and 'interaction', to which the two forms of consciousness, 'deanthropomorphising' (or scientific) and 'anthropocentric' (or ideological), are connected. In his mature ontological reflections, Georg Lukács explicitly acknowledges this differentiation in the interior of praxis, with the additional advantage – over dualisms originating in Kant – of affirming the ontologico-genetic unity of human praxis, based on labour, which he considers 'the model of all social praxis'. For Lukács, the main characteristic of labour is that it is

a process between human activity and nature: its acts tend to transform certain natural objects in values of use.... But in the more evolved forms of social praxis, this kind of action is accompanied with ever greater significance by *action over other people*, which ultimately – only ultimately, though – aims at mediating the production of values of use. Also, in this case, the ontologico-structural foundation is constituted by the teleological positions and by the series of causes they put in motion. However, the essential content of the teleological position, in this second case, is the attempt to induce another person (or group of persons) to formulate and to adopt, in his turn, certain teleological positions. This problem arises as soon as labour becomes social, in the sense that it is based on the cooperation of more than one person.... In this second form of teleological position, the finality aimed at is the immediate finality of other people.⁵³

So we have, on the side of labour, but *stemming from it*, the development of a kind of praxis that could be called 'interactive'.

Even though Lukács's reflections on art and ideology indicate that he was aware of the problem, the fact remains that he did not clarify in a definitive and systematic way the conclusion that the second kind of praxis, which is

'vulgar materialism': Gramsci 1975, p. 1449. Gramsci does not say what these tendencies would be, but I do not think it is difficult to discern them.

53. Lukács 1976–81, Vol. 2, pp. 55–6; 1980, p. 47. Jürgen Habermas, from a position that refers to Marx, attempted to specify the various modes of praxis and the forms of knowledge to which they corresponded. After distinguishing between 'labour' and 'interaction' (see Habermas 1968), the neo-Frankfurtian thinker worked out an ulterior distinction, within interactive praxis, between 'systemic interaction' (legal-coactive) and 'communicative interaction' (dialogic-consensual). (See Habermas 1981.) Now is not the time for a deeper discussion of Habermas's reflections, but it should be noted that, in spite of the extraordinary richness of Habermas's concepts, I believe they imply a background dualism, of Kantian origin, which runs against the dialectical-unitarian orientation of the Marxist ontology of social being, to which praxis presents itself as an unity of unity and of diversity.

always an 'inter-action' (or action over action), implies a mode of knowledge different from that which exists in labour. Labour demands for its execution that which we earlier defined as scientific knowledge, or, to put it in Lukács's term, deanthropomorphising knowledge. To this extent, the lack of distinction between the forms of consciousness connected to 'labour' and 'interaction' respectively is relatively justified as interactive praxis can and should be seen from a 'deanthropomorphising' perspective: to know more objectively the motors, the determinations, and so on of human action is a precondition for any praxis that intends to influence it, as was well-understood by Machiavelli. There is, however, another decisive determination inherent to interactive action: when I attempt to act over the action of another (or others), I must establish with his (or their) consciousness a type of relationship that is clearly not the same relationship that I establish with the marble on which I work to build a statue or with statistical data from which I want to draw scientific economic conclusions. No matter how great my objective ('scientific') knowledge of the conditions and motors of another's action, I can only transform this action, making it concretise itself in determinate teleological projects, if I am able to *persuade* him to act according to my intentions; and even if my ultimate resource of persuasion is coercion, I have to persuade him, for instance, that keeping his own life, even under oppression, is *worth more* than death or the punishment his rebellion would entail. Therefore, the contents of consciousness that I use in this kind of action are effective not only when they reproduce the real, when they are science: what matters is that they persuade another and lead him to action, which implies that these contents must also be *norms* or *values*.

It was precisely this kind of knowledge – peculiar to interactive praxis – that Gramsci called *ideology*. In the *Notebooks*, he attempted to describe many concrete examples of this, from folklore and common sense to the 'philosophy of philosophers'. As we have seen, interactive praxis (which, to recall the Greek stem of the word, we could also call 'political') mobilises not only a group of more-or-less scientific pieces of knowledge about nature and the determiners of action, but also a set of norms or values that can direct the action towards the desired objects. Therefore, within the context of this kind of praxis, there is a level at which science and ideology become effectively indistinguishable. To say that science is 'a human relation' (and therefore an interaction) and to reduce the kind of knowledge that exists in it to ideology is, for sure, a limitation of Gramsci's philosophical reflection. But to affirm that, in interactive praxis, the mobilised consciousness is mainly axiologico-normative, represents, on the other hand, an essential contribution to the ontological understanding of political praxis, which is a decisive sphere of social interaction in general. Besides, this proposition allows us to overcome a purely

gnoseological view of ideology, which sees it as mere 'false consciousness', and to understand it mainly as a practical reality, as an ontologico-social phenomenon. So, the materialist ontology of political praxis, the central goal of Gramsci's philosophical reflections, would not be complete without a theory of ideology. Reflecting on the various modes of social consciousness, in the *Notebooks* Gramsci provided us with the most complete and intelligent Marxist theory of ideology.

As he explained what he took 'philosophy' to mean, Gramsci provided us with his concept of ideology and, at the same time, pointed to its link with politics. For him, philosophy is ideology because it is

a unity of faith between a conception of the world and a corresponding norm of conduct.... Hence the reason why philosophy cannot be divorced from politics. And one can show furthermore that the choice and the criticism of a conception of the world is also a political matter.⁵⁴

The identity between philosophy and ideology, and between ideology and politics, led Gramsci to say, in a formulation replete with democratic consequences, that 'every man is a philosopher', that is, that every man manifests in his interactive action (by means of his language, his common sense and so on) a set of notions about what *is* and about what *ought to be*, both a conception of the world and an ethics.⁵⁵ If a man did not have any 'philosophy', even if callow and contradictory, he would not be able to interact with his fellow men. We must remember that, for Gramsci, the task of the philosophy of praxis as a superior, coherent and organic ideology is to criticise conceptions of the world that are still confused, contradictory, marked by 'egoistic-passional', corporatist and individualist elements; to foster an 'intellectual and moral reform' that spreads among the masses a new, radically secular and immanentist high culture, one that contributes to the creation of a new collective subject from the proletariat – thus converted into the national hegemonic class – that promotes and furthers the radical transformation of society. If ideology is decisive for the practical orientation of men, then ideological critique – cultural battle – becomes a decisive moment in the struggle for bringing together a new 'collective national-popular will' in the struggle to overcome an old relation of hegemony and to build a new one.

For Gramsci, therefore, ideology, as a conception of the world articulated with the ethics that follows from it, is something that transcends knowledge and connects itself directly with action that aims at influencing the behaviour

54. Gramsci 1975, pp. 1378–9; 1971b, p. 326.

55. Gramsci 1975, p. 1375; 1971b, p. 353.

of other people. It is interesting to observe that the late Lukács defined ideology in very much the same way:

Even if it is a form of consciousness, ideology is not absolutely identical with the cognitive representation of reality, but, as a means to deal with social conflicts, it is primarily directed towards praxis, sharing with the latter – within the context of its own specificity, naturally – an orientation for the transformation of reality (the defence of reality as given against the attempts to change it has the same practical structure).⁵⁶

There is yet another similarity. Gramsci saw in philosophy, as a higher form of ideology – contrasted with the fragmentary figures of conscience proper to everyday life, such as common sense, folklore, and so on – the elements that allow for the promotion of a universalisation, that is, the ‘cathartic’ passage from the ‘egoistic-passional’ (corporatist) moment to the ‘ethico-political’ (hegemonic-universal) moment. Even though Lukács applied his definition of ideology only to these universalising forms, he arrived at a similar conclusion:

These generalisations [created by ideology] of practico-political orientation, even though produced at their individual sources by intellectual and emotional stimuli, constitute the *medium* that allows political praxis to overcome immediate class interest and become a socially universal moment.⁵⁷

In Gramsci’s terms, that means ideology is the *medium* of hegemony. Gramsci was fully-aware of the connection between the building of a conception of the world and the battle for hegemony:

Critical understanding of the self takes place therefore through a struggle of political ‘hegemonies’ and of opposing directions, first in the ethical field and then in that of politics proper, in order to arrive at the working out at a higher level of one’s own conception of reality.... This is why it must be stressed that the political development of the concept of hegemony represents a great philosophical advance as well as a politico-practical one.⁵⁸

As such, even though Lukács’s position on the forms of consciousness is more mediated (as he did not reduce human knowledge to ideology, leaving room in his reflection for the objective forms of scientific knowledge), he and Gramsci shared in a refusal to analyse ideology from a strictly gnoseological

56. Lukács 1976–81, Vol. 2, p. 487.

57. Lukács 1976–81, Vol. 2, p. 498.

58. Gramsci 1975, p. 1385; 1971b, p. 327.

point of view, that is, merely as a 'false consciousness' opposed to 'true consciousness' (science). Both analysed ideology as a real force, as an ontological fact, which alters and modifies human life, even when its cognitive contents do not properly correspond to the reproduction of reality (one need only recall Gramsci's brilliant analyses of religion, popular ideologies, and so on). Furthermore, it is precisely because of this ontological weight, and not because of an incidental epistemological truth, that Gramsci was able to distinguish between ideologies: on the one hand, there are, as he calls them, 'arbitrary ideologies', belonging to individuals or to small groups, which are 'invented', short-lived, and have little influence on human action; on the other, we find 'organic ideologies', which express the aspirations of great historical trends, of classes or groups with a vocation for hegemony and with the ability to become national classes, lasting through whole historical eras and moving the actions of large masses.⁵⁹ The 'philosophy of praxis', that is, Marxism, would be precisely a philosophy of the latter type; according to Gramsci, its historical validity will last throughout the whole period that separates us from 'regulated society' or communism, that is, while antagonistic social contradictions persist.

Now it is possible to re-evaluate positively, in a different context, Gramsci's definition of objectivity as the 'universally subjective' already familiar to us. If this definition is mistaken, to the extent that it concerns the first kind of praxis, which aims at the direct domination of objective nature or the cognitive and practical appropriation of society as a 'second nature', it has a most important element of truth to the extent that it concerns 'interactive' or 'political' praxis. This kind of praxis aims, explicitly or implicitly, at creating a collective subject, that is, at commonly-performed teleological acts articulated amongst themselves and directed at the same goal: their objective, ontologico-social realisation would thus assume that the actors share an equally common set of *subjective* notions, values and beliefs, or, in other words, that they are moved by a collective will. In this case, therefore, that which is objectively social is synonymous with that which is universally subjective, or, more precisely, uni-

59. Gramsci 1975, p. 1507; 1971b, pp. 375–7. It is interesting to note that Lukács explicitly disagreed with Gramsci on this point: to the former, only the conceptions of the world that mobilise large masses deserve to be called ideologies. After mentioning Gramsci's distinction, he said, 'While a thought remains a mere product or ideal expression of an individual, no matter how much value or lack thereof it may contain, it cannot be considered ideology. Not even a broader social diffusion is able to transform a complex of thoughts in ideology. For that to occur, a well-determined social function is necessary' (Lukács 1976–81, Vol. 2, p. 445). As Gramsci's position implies degrees and, therefore, a dialectical development, it seems to me more fruitful than that of Lukács.

versally intersubjective. For instance, independently of the ontologico-natural existence or non-existence of a god or gods, religion is an ontologico-social, objective phenomenon when it becomes the intersubjective belief of large groups of people, that is, when it becomes what Gramsci called an 'organic ideology'. Similarly, even if democracy does not become *political culture*, if it is not intersubjectively shared by the citizens, it does appear as a universal value and as practical reality, if a society has formal 'democratic' institutions. Thus Gramsci's concept of objectivity, even though problematic from the gnoseological point of view, is an indispensable tool for a historical-materialist understanding of the intersubjective forms of social interaction.

Without this concept, Gramsci would not have been able to create the notion of hegemony, which is central to his political theory: the struggle for hegemony entails action that, aiming at an effectively *objective* result in the social sphere, implies the construction of an *intersubjective* universe of beliefs and values. On the other hand, as we shall see in the next chapter, Gramsci explicitly articulated hegemony with the achievement of *consensus*, distinguishing it from *coercion* as a means of determining people's actions. So, if we combine the Gramscian notions of objectivity and hegemony, we can formulate – maybe going beyond Gramsci's letter, but following his spirit – a democratic, contractualist proposal for the formation of the public sphere, the sphere of social values, of what Hegel called 'ethicity':⁶⁰ men must be led through persuasion, and not through coercion, to perform the interactive actions which will result in the construction and reproduction of what Gramsci called 'regulated society' (communism). Even though the 'ethicity' of this new social order can and should be illuminated or known by science, by *episteme*, it will be interactively expressed as *doxa*, as *public opinion*, as something built through consensus, therefore implying dialogue.

I believe Gramsci's theory of objectivity is the solution to a problem also faced by Habermas, who offered a solution in terms of an 'ideal speech situation', in which 'truths' and common values are established through dialogue and consensus.⁶¹ Gramsci, however, had an advantage over Habermas as he avoided all enlightened utopianism: for him, communication that is 'free from coercion' – the achievement of objectivity or universality as a result of overcoming 'partial and fallacious ideologies' – can only fully manifest itself after the elimination of antagonistic social contradictions, that is, in 'regulated' or classless society. Gramsci wrote,

60. Hegel 1986, p. 292 ff. For a definition of the contractualist moment in Gramsci's thought, see Appendix One.

61. Habermas 1981 and 1985.

Man knows objectively in so far as knowledge is real for the whole human race historically unified in a single unitary cultural system. But this process of historical unification takes place through the disappearance of the internal contradictions which tear apart human society, while these contradictions themselves are the condition for the formation of groups and for the birth of ideologies which are not concretely universal.... There exists therefore a struggle for objectivity (to free oneself from partial and fallacious ideologies) and this struggle is the same as the struggle for the cultural unification of the human race. What the idealists call 'spirit' is not a point of departure but a point of arrival...⁶²

That does not mean that the immediate struggle for hegemony, for a classless society, is not also a means to *increasingly* achieve this kind of communication, to ever-more build and broaden a public consensual sphere that is free from coercion. The intersubjective conception of objectivity and the understanding of hegemony as consensus allowed Gramsci to provide the philosophical foundations for a democratic-contractual theory for the establishment of socialism.

Finally, it is important to recall that Gramsci's concept of ideology as an ontologico-social reality is another moment in which he comes closer to Marx and distances himself from mechanistic positions that deny or downplay the role of ideologies in social transformations: one need only think of a Marx quote Gramsci liked to repeat, that 'theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses'.⁶³ For Gramsci, human consciousness is not a mere epiphenomenon: in the form of ideology, it is rather an ontologically determinant moment of the social being. Therefore, though the equivalence of science and ideology creates problems for some of his formulations in the field of knowledge theory, this does not prevent him, once more, from making relevant observations in the field of the ontology of social being.

62. Gramsci 1975, p. 1442; 1971b, pp. 445–6.

63. Introduction in Marx 1970.

Chapter Five

The 'Extended' Theory of the State

5.1. The concept of 'civil society'

When we referred, in a previous chapter, to the first formulations of the Gramscian concept of hegemony (as a concretisation and dialectical overcoming of Lenin's formulations), we observed that an essential element was still lacking for the determination of the specificity and novelty of Gramsci's political theory: the concept of 'civil society' as the material bearer of the social figure of hegemony, as the sphere of mediation between the economic infrastructure and the state in the narrow sense. This concept took shape only in the *Notebooks*. Norberto Bobbio wrote one of the most complete philological analyses of this concept and noted that,

In order to rebuild Gramsci's political thought, the key concept, the concept that must be taken as a starting-point, is the concept of *civil society*.¹

However, I believe Bobbio's analysis – in spite of its philological merits – leads to false theoretical conclusions.² He correctly points to an essential difference in the concept of civil society as held by Gramsci and

1. Bobbio 1976, p. 21.

2. The first harsh critic of Bobbio's position was Jacques Texier, who presented his objections right after Bobbio's exposition on the theme: see Texier 1975, pp. 152–7. See also Texier 1979, pp. 48–79. A recent, consistent critique of Bobbio's reading and of Bruno Trentin's similar positions (Trentin 1997) can be found in Liguori 2006, especially on pp. 30–6 and pp. 43–53. For a proper understanding of Gramsci's concept of civil society, see also Buttigieg 2002.

Marx: whereas Marx treated civil society as the material base, the economic infrastructure, 'for Gramsci civil society does not belong to the moment of structure, but rather to the moment of superstructure'.³ From this, however, Bobbio moves to a false conclusion: as civil society (the economic base) was, for Marx, the primary ontological factor in the explanation of History, Bobbio apparently believes the change effected by Gramsci led him to strip infrastructure of its ontologico-genetic, explanatory centrality, and ascribe it to an element from superstructure, namely civil society. 'In Marx, this active and positive moment is a structural one; in Gramsci it is superstructural'.⁴ Thus, Gramsci as a social theorist is characterised as an idealist, placing the determinant element in the historical process on the political superstructure, and not on the economic base.

In fact, Bobbio's mistake comes from two misunderstandings. First, there is a lack of consequentiality in his argument: if Gramsci's concept of civil society is not the same as Marx's, why, then, should we believe that it had the same function (that of 'ultimate' determinant) for both the author of the *Notebooks* and the German thinker? Second, in close relation with what has just been said, Bobbio examines the issue of civil society in Gramsci in relation to the mutually-conditioning link between infrastructure and superstructure, without realising that the concept actually refers to the issue of the state: the concept of 'civil society' is Gramsci's preferred means of enriching with new determinations the Marxist theory of the state. And if, indeed, it is true, as we have seen, that this enrichment leads to a dialectical concretisation of the issue of how economic base determines superstructure (that is, the determination becomes more complex and mediated as civil society grows stronger), this does not in any way deny Gramsci's acceptance of the basic principle of historical materialism: the production and reproduction of global social relations is the primary ontological factor in the explanation of history. To correctly identify this point is, I believe, essential for a fair estimation not only of Gramsci's place in the evolution of Marxism, but also for an understanding of his concept of civil society. Gramsci neither denied nor reversed Marx's essential discoveries, but 'merely' enriched, broadened and concretised them within the framework of a full acceptance of the method of historical materialism.

How, then, did Gramsci 'broaden' the 'classic' Marxist theory of the state with his concept of civil society?⁵ The great discovery by Marx and Engels in the field of political theory was the affirmation of the class-nature of every

3. Bobbio 1976, p. 27.

4. Bobbio 1976, p. 28.

5. As far as I know, the use of the phrase '*extended* theory of the State' in reference to Gramsci's reflections first appeared in Buci-Glucksmann, 1975, pp. 87–138.

state-phenomenon; the discovery led them to oppose Hegel and 'desacralise'⁶ and de-fetishise the state, showing how its apparent autonomy and 'superiority' finds its genesis and explanation in the immanent contradictions of civil society as a whole. The genesis of the state lies in society's division into classes, and that is why it only exists *when* and *while* such a division (derived, in its turn, from the social relations of production) persists; the *function* of the state is precisely to maintain and reproduce this division, thus allowing for the common interests of a particular class to be imposed as if they were the general interest of society. Marx, Engels and Lenin also examined the *structure* of the state: they saw repression – the legal and/or *de facto* monopoly of coercion and violence – as the foremost means by which the state in general (and also the liberal-capitalist state as such) enforces its class-nature. To summarise, Marx and, above all, Lenin tended to identify the state – the machinery of the state – with the complex of its *repressive apparatuses*.

It would be a display of anti-historicism to present this characterisation as a result of a one-sided view on Marx's part, in the same way as it would be anti-historicist to accuse him of not having discussed imperialism in his work. This view of the repressive (or dictatorial) aspect as the main aspect of class-domination to a large extent corresponds to the real nature of the states considered by Marx, Engels and, perhaps above all, Lenin and the Bolsheviks. In a time of scarce political participation, when the action of the proletariat was expressed by vanguards which, although combative, were few in numbers and forced to operate in clandestinity, it was only natural that the repressive aspect of the state occupied the foreground of reality itself, and so deserved a large part of the attention of the 'classic authors'. Gramsci, however, worked in a time and geographical context in which the complexity of the state-phenomenon was greater: he could see that the escalation of the processes of socialisation of political participation that took place in the 'Western' countries starting mostly from the last third of the nineteenth century (the formation of large unions and mass-parties, the obtaining of universal suffrage, and so on) led to the creation of a new social sphere, possessing laws and relatively autonomous and specific functions as regards the economic world and the repressive apparatuses of the state.

Even though not yet using the phrase 'civil society', it was precisely at the point where Gramsci discussed 'Hegel's doctrine of parties and associations as the "private" weft of the state'⁷ in the *Notebooks* – a passage probably dating from March 1929, thus one of his first prison-writings – that he showed how his extended conception of the state begins exactly with the

6. Gerratana 1972, pp. 173–211.

7. Gramsci 1975, pp. 56–7; 1971b, pp. 259–60.

acknowledgement of the socialisation of politics in developed capitalism and the formation of collective mass political subjects. He wrote,

[Hegel's] conception of association could not help still being vague and primitive, halfway between the political and the economic; it was in accordance with the historical experience of the time, which was very limited and offered only one perfected example of organisation – the 'corporative' (a politics grafted directly on to the economy). Marx was not able to have historical experiences superior (or at least much superior) to those of Hegel...Marx's concept of organisation remains entangled amid the following elements: craft organisation; Jacobin clubs; secret conspiracies by small groups; journalistic organisation.⁸

Marx did not, therefore, have the opportunity to experience large unions with millions of people, legal mass workers' and popular political parties, parliaments elected by direct and secret universal suffrage, proletarian newspapers printed in large amounts, and such like. In short, he was unable to fully capture an essential aspect of the relations of power in a developed capitalist society, that very 'private weft' mentioned by Gramsci, who would later call it 'civil society' and the 'private apparatuses of hegemony'. That is, the organisms of political participation which one adheres to voluntarily (therefore, 'private') and which are not defined by the use of repression. As we have seen, when Gramsci coined the phrase 'civil society' to designate them, he distanced himself from Marx's terminology;⁹ on the contrary, and as the excerpt here-quoted suggests, he seems to come close, *in a certain sense*, to the conception of Hegel, who introduced to 'civil society' – regarded as the second figure of ethnicity, between the family and the state – the corporations, that is, economic associations that can be seen as primitive forms of the modern unions.¹⁰ This partial approximation to Hegel must not, however, obscure the *novelty* of Gramsci's concept, which he used to express a new fact, a new determination of the state, neither denying nor eliminating the determinations recorded by the 'classic' authors, but rather, representing an

8. Ibid.

9. In his reply to the previously-discussed theses by Bobbio, Gerratana noted that Gramsci's distancing was deliberate: in the translation-exercises he did in prison, he translated Marx's phrase '*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*' not as the usual 'civil society', preferring the literal phrase 'bourgeois society', as if he intended to indicate the difference between the two concepts. See Gerratana 1969, pp. 169–73.

10. Hegel 1986, §§ 250–6. I italicised the phrase 'in a certain sense' because this approximation is partial, as Hegel, unlike Gramsci, also includes economic relations (the production and reproduction of material life) in 'civil society'.

enrichment and a development of them – something of which Gramsci was fully aware.

Gramsci's extended theory of the state (the conservation and overcoming of 'classical' Marxist theory) is based on the discovery of the 'private apparatuses of hegemony', which led him to distinguish two essential spheres within superstructures. In a letter to Tatiana Schucht dated September 1931, Gramsci upheld his new concept of the intellectual and provided possibly the best summary of his extended conception of the state:

I extend the notion of intellectual considerably, and do not limit myself to the habitual meaning, which refers only to great intellectuals. This study also leads to *certain determinations of the concept of State*, which is usually understood as political society (or dictatorship; or coercive apparatus to bring the mass of the people into conformity with the specific type of production and the specific economy at a given moment) and not as an equilibrium between political society and civil society (or hegemony of a social group over the entire national society exercised through the so-called private organisations, like the Church, the trade unions, the schools, etc.).¹¹

Therefore the state, in a broad sense, with 'new determinations', comprises two main spheres: *political society* (which Gramsci also terms 'the state in the narrow sense' or 'coercive state'), formed by the complex of mechanisms by which the dominant class keeps its legal monopoly of repression and of violence, and which is identified with the instruments of coercion controlled by the executive and police-military bureaucracies; and *civil society*, formed precisely by the complex of those organisations responsible for the elaboration and/or spreading of ideologies, such as the school system, churches, political parties, unions, professional organisations, the material organisation of culture (magazines, newspapers, publishing-houses, mass-media), and so on.

Two basic sets of problems distinguish the two spheres, and that is why Gramsci treated them somewhat separately. First, there is a difference in the *function* they have in the organisation of social life, in the articulation and reproduction of the relations of power. Together, both form 'the State (in its integral meaning: dictatorship + hegemony)';¹² in another context, the same state is defined by Gramsci as 'political society + civil society, in other words hegemony protected by the armour of coercion'.¹³ In this sense, both work to

11. Gramsci 1996, pp. 458–9; 1971b, p. 56.

12. Gramsci 1975, p. 811; 1971b, p. 239.

13. Gramsci 1975, pp. 763–4; 1971b, p. 263. The clarity of these two formulations refutes English historian Perry Anderson's reading, according to which Gramsci

conserve or to promote a particular economic base, depending on the interests of a fundamental social class. But the *way* the conservation or promotion is carried out varies in both cases: within civil society, and through it, social classes intend to exert *hegemony*, that is, they try to win allies for their positions by means of *political leadership* and *consensus*; through political society, on the contrary, classes always exert a *dictatorship*, or, more precisely, a *domination* through *coercion*. So, as we can see, political society (or the coercive state) is the moment of the state-phenomenon primarily discussed by Marx and Lenin, whereas the new determinations discovered by Gramsci focus on what he called civil society. The novelty introduced by Gramsci lies in the fact that hegemony, as a social figure, now has its own material base, an autonomous and particular space for its manifestation.

It is precisely here that the second difference between the two spheres lies: they are each distinguished by a (*social-institutional*) *materiality of their own*.¹⁴ While political society has its material bearers in the repressive instruments of the state (controlled by the executive and police-military bureaucracies), Gramsci called the material bearers of civil society the 'private apparatuses of hegemony', that is, voluntary social collective organisms relatively autonomous in the face of political society. Here, Gramsci addressed the new fact that the ideological sphere, in advanced, more complex capitalist societies, achieved a *material* (and not merely functional) autonomy regarding the state in the narrow sense. In other words, the need to achieve active and organised consensus as a basis for domination – a need created by the broadening of the socialisation of politics – created and/or renewed certain objectifications or social institutions, which now worked as specific material bearers (with their own structure and legality) of the social relations of hegemony. It is this material independence – simultaneously the basis and the result of the relative autonomy now assumed by the social figure of hegemony – that establishes civil society as a sphere in its own right, possessing its own legality and working as a necessary mediation between the economic structure and the coercive state. Here, we find an example of Gramsci concretely applying to the sphere of political praxis the materialist ontology of social being that lies at the foundation of Marx's theoretical work: for him, there is no form or social function without a material base, no historical objectivity that does not result from the dialectics between the social form and its material bearer. Concretely, in

oscillates between several conceptions of the relationship between civil society and the state, one of them implying a concept of hegemony as a synthesis of dictatorship and consensus (see Anderson 1977). A definitive critique regarding the aspects both of content and philology of the inaccuracies in Anderson's interpretation, which also highlights the essentially unitary and non-antinomic nature of Gramsci's prison-reflection, can be found in Francioni 1984, pp. 147–228.

14. On the dialectics between material base and social form, see Rubin 1972.

Marx, there is no exchange-value without use-value, there is no surplus-value without surplus-product, there are no social relations of production without material productive forces, and so on in Gramsci, there is no hegemony, nor there is political or ideological leadership, without the complex of material organisations that forms civil society as a specific political sphere of social being.

Even though Gramsci insisted on the structural and functional distinction of the two spheres, he never loses sight of the unitary moment.¹⁵ So, when he defined 'political society', he portrayed it in a relation of identity/distinction with civil society; political society is

...the apparatus of state coercive power which 'legally' enforces discipline on those groups who do not 'consent' either actively or passively. This apparatus is, however, constituted for the whole of society in anticipation of moments of crisis of command and direction [of the private apparatuses of hegemony] when spontaneous consent has failed.¹⁶

In another passage, he made the dialectics (unity in diversity) between political society and civil society even more clear:

The *supremacy* of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as 'domination' and as 'intellectual and moral leadership'. A social group dominates antagonistic groups, which it tends to 'liquidate', or to subjugate perhaps even by armed force; it leads kindred and allied groups.¹⁷

In this excerpt, the word *supremacy* refers to the synthetic moment that unifies (without homogenising) *hegemony* and *domination*, *consensus* and *coercion*, *leadership* and *dictatorship*. We still need to recall that, for Gramsci, these two functions – or two sets of functions – exist in the state anyhow; but the fact that a state is more hegemonic-consensual and less 'dictatorial' or vice-versa depends on the relative autonomy of the superstructural spheres, on the preponderance of one or another. In their turn, such autonomy and preponderance depend not only on the degree of the socialisation of politics

15. At a certain point, Gramsci states that the 'distinction between political society and civil society [is]... presented as an organic one, whereas in fact it is merely methodological... in actual reality civil society and State are one and the same' (Gramsci 1975, p. 1590; 1971b, p. 160). The statement can be misinterpreted (and it has been, by many scholars) as if Gramsci did not mean to affirm the material-ontological distinction between the two spheres. This not only runs against the very spirit of Gramsci's reflections (objectively denying their novelty and originality), but also contradicts Gramsci himself, who, in another passage in the *Notebooks*, refers, in a dialectically correct way, to the 'identity/distinction between civil society and political society' (Gramsci 1975, p. 1028).

16. Gramsci 1975, p. 1519; 1971b, pp. 6–7.

17. Gramsci 1975, p. 2010; 1971b, p. 57.

reached by the society discussed, but also on the correlation of forces between the social classes that struggle with each other for *supremacy*.

I believe it is important to highlight, at this point, the issue of civil society's material autonomy as a specific feature of its manifestation in more complex capitalist societies. This is important because we are discussing a topic on which the *Notebooks* are a little ambiguous. Gramsci apparently oscillates between affirming the existence of civil society even in precapitalist societies – an ever less frequently expressed position the further we read the *Notebooks* – and saying that civil society is a distinctive feature of societies with a high degree of socialisation of politics, of self-organisation of social groups – a more solid and grounded position. The ambiguity is partially justified by the fact that even pre- or protocapitalist forms of class-domination, including the overtly dictatorial and despotic ones, were also based on ideology, given that they needed a certain degree of legitimacy to properly function. For instance, a decisive role in the achievement of legitimacy by a state of the feudal-absolutist variety was played by religious ideology: the Church was an 'ideological state-apparatus' of crucial importance in the feudal era and a significant part of the absolutist one, and this certainly explains why Gramsci, in some passages of the *Notebooks*, seems to identify the relationship between Church and state with the relationship between civil society and political society,¹⁸ even for periods when there was no civil society in the modern sense of the word, the sense in which it appears most frequently in Gramsci's reflections, marking its originality and specificity.

It was not by chance that I used the phrase 'ideological state-apparatus', which, as we know, was coined by Louis Althusser.¹⁹ I believe the phrase is not synonymous with the concept of 'private apparatuses of hegemony' – something Althusser likes to make very clear – used by Gramsci to designate the organisms of modern civil society. For Althusser,

Gramsci obscures rather than illuminates [the issue] when he takes up the old bourgeois distinction between political society and civil society, [as] it is based on the present legal (bourgeois) distinction between 'public' and 'private.' ... The distinction between 'political society' and 'civil society' only exists from the perspective of the bourgeoisie.²⁰

18. For example, Gramsci 1975, pp. 763–4.

19. See Althusser 1976, pp. 67–125. In this essay, Althusser mentions Gramsci only once, in a footnote, to say that 'he was the only one to advance on the path we are now following', but that 'he did not systematise his intuitions, conserved in their sharpness though partial notes' (p. 82). Actually, as I tried to point out, Gramsci's positions on the 'extended' state do constitute a *systematic* theory; the issue at stake is that his theory is different from Althusser's apparently analogous theory, and even contrary to it.

20. Althusser 1978, pp. 9–11.

On the other hand, still arguing against Gramsci's more mature formulation, Althusser affirms that 'the state has always been "extended," [and it is] a mistake to consider this extension as something recent'.²¹ I believe Althusser not only distorts Gramsci's reflections, depriving them of their originality, but also prevents himself from understanding the specificity of the ideological sphere in the world of developed capitalism. It is precisely the *historical* dimension of the question proposed by Gramsci that is lost – something not unusual, when it comes to Althusser.

Even if I reject Althusser's theoretical premises and his conclusions, I have used his phrase, 'ideological state-apparatuses' (which he used in contrast to 'repressive state-apparatuses') because I believe it adequately describes the situation of ideology as a source of legitimacy precisely in those times and situations in which the state had not yet been 'extended', that is, in pre- or proto-capitalist societies. In such societies, there was an unbreakable unity between, for instance, Church and state, so that the Church was not yet something 'private' in relation to a 'public' state. The ideology spread by the Church (and, we must remember, it controlled the education-system) had no autonomy whatsoever regarding the coercive state, or 'political society'. With the help of the state, the official Church imposed this ideology by means of coercion and repression, using the same means employed by the state to enforce its general domination. At the time of the bourgeois-democratic revolutions, and already at the time of the establishment of the first liberal régimes (with restricted political participation), a new fact appears: the secularisation of the state, as we might call it. Starting with the churches, the ideological instruments of legitimacy become 'private' in relation to the 'public'; the state no longer coercively imposes one religion; even the school-system, now largely controlled by the state, is ever-more faced with an ideological dispute within itself. Ideologies, even if obviously not indifferent to the state, become something 'private' with respect to it: adherence to competing ideologies becomes a voluntary (or relatively voluntary) act, and is no longer something imposed by coercion.

Thus are created, as material bearers of views of the world struggling for hegemony, what Gramsci called 'the private apparatuses of hegemony'. Not only are new 'hegemonic apparatuses' created by the struggle of the masses (such as unions, parties, and opinion-newspapers), but the old 'ideological state-apparatuses' inherited by capitalism also become something 'private' and take their place in civil society in its modern sense (as in the case of churches and even the school-system).²² The possibility directly denied by

21. Althusser 1978, p. 12.

22. Even though Gramsci does not use the words 'organic' and 'traditional' to distinguish one kind of 'private apparatus of hegemony' from the other, I do not

Althusser has an opening: the ideology (or system of ideologies) of the subaltern classes is now able to achieve hegemony within one or more private hegemonic apparatuses, even before these classes have achieved state-power strictly-speaking, that is, before they become ruling classes. This is the possibility foreseen by Gramsci when he wrote, 'a social group can, and indeed must, already exercise "leadership" [be hegemonic] before winning governmental power'.²³ Within complex societies, in which the state is 'extended', this possibility is also a necessity, as, Gramsci continues, 'this indeed is one of the principal conditions for the winning of such power'.²⁴

The distinction between Gramsci's and Althusser's concepts is not, therefore, merely theoretical or historical, but rather entails serious consequences in the field of politics. Althusser considered the organisms of civil society as part of the state in the narrow sense, thus proposing a political strategy that, as it excessively stresses the 'separate' nature of the workers' party and its distinction from the state, preaches a struggle to be fought entirely *outside the state*:

As a matter of principle, consistently with the reason for its existence, the [workers'] party must be *outside the state*... It must never see itself as a 'government party'.²⁵

The core of Gramsci's strategy of the 'war of position' thus becomes irrelevant, that is, the idea that the achievement of state-power in the *complex* societies of *recent* capitalism must be preceded by a long battle for hegemony and for consensus within civil society and through civil society, that is, *within the state in its extended sense*. While Althusser's view necessarily leads to the idea of a direct confrontation with the state (as it is impossible to progressively weaken it by 'occupying' spaces within it), Gramsci's, on the other hand, supposes the idea of a 'long march' through the institutions of civil society. As Biagio de Giovanni very aptly says,

Gramsci places at the core of the *Notebooks* the idea of *transition as a process*. The idea of the sudden collapse of bourgeois-capitalist society is pushed aside.... At the heart of this idea of transition as a process we find the new kind of reflection about the state developed Gramsci.²⁶

think we would be betraying the spirit of his reflections if we extended his famous distinction between the two kinds of intellectual to the organisms of civil society. This extension would be justified by, as Gramsci believed, the conspicuous role played by intellectuals in civil society and the struggles for hegemony.

23. Gramsci 1975, p. 2010; 1971b, p. 58.

24. Ibid.

25. Althusser 1978, p. 15.

26. De Giovanni 1977, p. 56.

In other words, here we find his conception of the state as a synthesis of political society and civil society, of the coercive state and the *private* instruments of hegemony.

5.2. 'Regulated society' and the end of the state

It is highly important to observe how, as a result of the relative (functional and material) autonomy of the spheres of the superstructure, Gramsci simultaneously concretises and overcomes the theory of Marx, Engels and Lenin on the extinction of the state in the communist, classless society, which, because of censorship, he called 'regulated society'. As we have seen, the theory of the extinction of the state is an essential aspect of the 'critique of politics', which, in its turn, is an ineliminable moment – just like the 'critique of political economy' – of Marxist social theory. Furthermore, Gramsci seems to have established a relationship of continuity/overcoming with the founders of the philosophy of praxis. This development was made possible, in part, because Gramsci had the chance to evaluate the concrete experience of the construction of socialism in the Soviet Union, almost fifteen years after the October Revolution. In this sense, I believe Gramsci's notes on the topic indicate a clear disagreement with the course of the USSR after the 1928–9 turn, that is, after the gradualist and consensual conception of the transition to socialism implicit in the NEP was abandoned, and the 'revolution from above' began, with forced collectivisation and accelerated industrialisation.

It is true that, in the *Notebooks*, the only reference made to Stalin is a positive one. Considering him the 'interpreter of the majority movement [Bolshevism]', Gramsci puts himself on the side of Stalin against Trotsky in the dispute over the possibility of the construction of socialism in a single country.²⁷ However, it should be noted that Gramsci's support for Stalin was anachronistic, considering the time when he wrote it (probably February 1933). He supports the 'interpreter of the majority movement' – led not only by Stalin, but also by Bukharin – who in 1925–8 defeated the so-called 'Left Opposition', allowing the New Economic Policy to prevail against the anti-peasant campaign of forced collectivisation. Moreover, it can be seen that this support is being given for the fight against Trotsky, whose positions – already harshly criticised in the 1926 letter to the Central Committee of the CPSU, which we discussed in Chapter Three – Gramsci did not stop fighting throughout the *Notebooks*, seeing Trotsky as 'the political theorist of frontal attack in a period in which

27. Gramsci 1975, pp. 1728–30; 1971b, pp. 240–1.

it only leads to defeats'.²⁸ In his positive reference to Stalin, Gramsci was not, therefore, taking into account his relentless battle against Bukharin and the 'Right Opposition' beginning in 1928–9, in which he objectively sided with the economic policy of the Trotskyist-Zinovievist opposition against the NEP's gradualism, as defended by Bukharin's group.

But even though Stalin was not directly criticised in the prison-notes, Gramsci did not spare him from negative remarks about his actions and his personality in conversation with his fellow inmates. By the end of 1930, Gramsci told his friend and comrade Enzo Riboldi:

We must take into account that Stalin's mental *habitus* is very different from that of Lenin. Lenin spent many years abroad and so had an international view of socio-political problems. The same cannot be said of Stalin, who always stayed in Russia and kept the nationalist mentality, as we can see from the cult of the 'Great Russians'. In the International as well, Stalin is first a Russian, then a communist: we need to be careful with him.²⁹

Ercole Piacentini, another fellow inmate, also notes in his recollections: 'He talked about Stalin two or three times, saying he knew of Lenin's testament [which calls Stalin 'arrogant' and 'rude' and asks for his removal from the position of general secretary of the Party] and that he agreed with its contents'.³⁰ However, I believe there is something more relevant than these recollections, which can always be vitiated by anachronism: the observations in the *Notebooks* themselves, which refer *indirectly* to Stalin's actions after the 1929 'turn'.

Before we address this topic, let us go back to the issue of the extinction of the state. For Gramsci, such an extinction would mean the gradual disappearance of the mechanisms of coercion, that is, 'the re-absorption of political society into civil society'.³¹ Advances in the construction of socialism would cause the social functions of *domination* and *coercion* to open up more and more room for *hegemony* and *consensus*. He said:

It is possible to imagine the coercive element of the State withering away by degrees, as ever-more conspicuous elements of regulated society (or ethical State or civil society) make their appearance.³²

28. Gramsci 1975, pp. 801–2; 1971b, p. 238.

29. Spriano 1969, p. 275.

30. Piacentini 1974, p. 32.

31. Gramsci 1975, p. 662; 1971b, p. 253.

32. Gramsci 1975, p. 764; 1971b, p. 263.

On the other hand, this re-absorption of the state by civil society – the end of alienation in the political sphere – is connected with one of Gramsci's basic concerns: that the division between rulers and ruled, leaders and led, which he acknowledged as necessary at a certain level of social development (in which there is not just the division of society into classes, but also a certain degree of technical division of labour), is not considered a 'perpetual division of the human race', but 'only an historical fact, corresponding to certain conditions'. Thus it becomes necessary 'to create the conditions in which this division [between rulers and ruled] is no longer necessary'.³³

Anyone who has read *The State and Revolution* is aware that Lenin had the same concern with the complete socialisation of power, or, more precisely, with the participation of all in the management of economic and social relations. However, if Lenin (and even more so Engels) foresee a quasi-automatic extinction of the state as a result of the progressive extinction of classes at the economic level and the spreading of knowledge among the masses, Gramsci apparently supposes there to be a need for a struggle in the specific field of politics in order to render possible the end of alienation, as manifested in the existence of a state separated from society, whatever its class-content. This is what seems to come out of his notes on 'statolatry', in which he wrote, "'statolatry" must not be abandoned to itself... It must be criticised'.³⁴ It is as if he had said that the 'workers' state with bureaucratic deformations' (the phrase used by Lenin to describe the Soviet state in 1921) had its own dynamics, creating interests that point to its perpetuation. Hence the need for a permanent 'socialist critique' as part of the process to which Gramsci frequently referred as 'intellectual and moral reform'.

It is not difficult to see in this Gramscian reformulation of the theory of the end of the state – by means of the creation of a '(self-) regulated society' in which the distinction between rulers and ruled will have disappeared – is a position that runs against the theories promoted by Stalin, according to which the coercive state had to strengthen itself as much as possible during the whole period of the transition to communism. I do not believe there can be any other meaning for the remarks contained in the note on 'statolatry', written in April 1932. Gramsci began by acknowledging that, in some countries, a period of strengthening of the state is necessary during the first stages in the construction of socialism:

For some social groups, which before their ascent to autonomous State life have not had a long independent period of cultural and moral development

33. Gramsci 1975, p. 1752; 1971b, p. 144.

34. Gramsci 1975, p. 1020; 1971b, p. 268.

on their own (as was made possible in mediaeval society and under the absolute régimes by the juridical existence of the privileged Estates or orders), a period of statolatry is necessary and indeed opportune.³⁵

That is, wherever civil society is weak, and the traditions of political democracy and autonomous popular organisation are feeble or inexistent, the transition to a new order cannot be based on the same foundations it would find in a 'Western' society, thereby creating a need for a 'dictatorial' period, in which the coercive state becomes stronger. Such was precisely the case – and Gramsci's references throughout the note to 'absolutist governments' and 'regulated society' leave no room for doubts – first of tsarist Russia and then of the young Soviet Republic.

I believe, however, we can see clear opposition to the 'Stalinist model' in the words that soon followed those previously quoted:

However, this kind of 'statolatry' must not be abandoned to itself, must not, especially, become theoretical fanaticism or be conceived of as 'perpetual'. It must be criticised, precisely in order to develop and produce new forms of State life, in which the initiative of individuals and groups will have a 'State' character, even if it is not due to the 'government of the functionaries' (make State life become 'spontaneous').³⁶

And if we observe that, a little beforehand Gramsci had contrasted the 'government of functionaries' with 'self-government', political society with civil society, we see that his criticism of 'statolatry' is simultaneously a plain condemnation of the bureaucratic management of the state and a defence of the 'self-government of producers' manifested in the organisms of civil society. What Gramsci's note apparently says, in sum, is that if civil society is weak *before* coming into power, the task would fall to the socialist state to strengthen it *later*, as a condition for its own extinction as a state, for its re-absorption by the self-managed organisms of civil society. Gramsci was in full agreement with Lenin on this point, when he said that 'victorious socialism cannot consolidate its victory and bring humanity to the withering away of the state without implementing full democracy'.³⁷ The new aspect, Gramsci's concretisation of the 'classical' theory of the extinction of the state, lies in his – realistic! – idea that it is the mechanisms of the coercive state, of political society, that disappear, while the organisms of civil society are conserved and become the material bearers of the 'self-government of the associated

35. Gramsci 1975, p. 1020; 1971b, p. 268.

36. Ibid.

37. Lenin 1964b, p. 67.

producers'. The extinction of the state does not imply the ambitious, though utopian, idea of a society without a government.³⁸

Moreover, there is yet another point on which Gramsci's reflections seem to collide with the theory and practice of Stalinism: the refusal to identify the party with the state, and the defence of the socialist state as a secular, humanistic state. He says:

The state [must be] conceived as capable of being subsumed into 'regulated society': in this society, the *ruling party is not organisationally confused with the government*, being rather an instrument for the passage from civil-political society to 'regulated society', as it subsumes both in itself (instead of perpetuating their contradiction) etc.³⁹

If we connect this observation with the previous observation on the need to criticise 'statolatry', we can conclude that – if the party and the government are one and the same – there is a tendency of the coercive state (in the form of party-state) to perpetuate itself, given the absence of an instrument that properly allows for criticism of the authoritarian bureaucratism that arises from it and to fight for its re-absorption in 'regulated society'. On the other hand, in a note in which he talks about 'the struggle for an autonomous and superior culture', Gramsci defined it as

the positive part of the struggle whose negative and polemical manifestations bear names with the privative 'a-' and 'anti-' – a-theism, anti-clericalism etc. One thus gives a modern and contemporary form to the traditional secular humanism that must be the ethical basis of the new type of State.⁴⁰

In his defence of the socialist state as a secular, humanistic state, and not a strictly-ideological one, Gramsci sets himself against another 'pillar' of the Stalinist 'model': that which, identifying the party with the state, also identifies the ideology of the party with the ideology of the state.

To conclude, we can observe that the concept of civil society not only provided Gramsci with the instruments to concretise the theory of the extinction of the state, which is a part of the Marxist *critique of politics*, but also leads him to give concrete – even though brief and scant – indications regarding the problems posed by the *construction of socialism*. These indications, as we have seen, provide elements for a Marxist critique of the Stalinist model imposed on the USSR mainly after 1929, a model that Gramsci seems to consider

38. For a lucid reflection on 'the extinction of the state' according to Marx and Gramsci, see Losurdo 1997, pp. 199–205.

39. Gramsci 1975, p. 734.

40. Gramsci 1975, p. 1509; 1971b, pp. 387–8.

'statolatrous', bureaucratic-authoritarian and centred on a false identification between party and state. Certainly, it would be anachronistic to attribute to Gramsci a complete critical awareness of so-called 'actually-existing socialism', which perhaps would not have been possible in his time; but it would also be wrong to leave aside his indications of an original conception of the *construction* of socialism, different from the one that guided the USSR and other socialist countries in their path. His originality is thus not limited to the formulation of a new strategy for the struggle for socialism in the 'Western' countries, even if it is here that we will find the more consistent and fruitful part of his legacy.

Chapter Six

Socialist Strategy in the 'West'

6.1. War of movement and war of position

The extended theory of the state is the basis for Gramsci's original answer to the question of why the revolution failed in the 'Western' countries: according to him, the reason for the failure lies in not having given due consideration to the structural difference between the social formations of the 'East' (including tsarist Russia), distinguished by the weakness of civil society, in contrast with a near absolute preponderance of the coercive state, and the social formations of the 'West', distinguished by a more balanced relationship between civil society and political society, that is, by a concrete 'extension' of the state.¹ Advancing from this answer, Gramsci was able to formulate, in a positive way, his strategic proposal for 'Western' countries: in the 'Eastern' formations, the preponderance of the coercive state-force the class-struggle to resort to a strategy of frontal attack, a 'war of movement' or 'war of manoeuvre', directly aimed at conquering and conserving the state in the narrow sense; in the 'West', however, battles must be fought first within the context of civil society, aiming at obtaining positions and spaces ('war of position'), politico-ideological leadership, and the consensus of major groups of the population, as a condition for the achievement of state-power and its subsequent conservation.

1. 'In the East the state was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous; in the West, there was a proper relation between state and civil society' (Gramsci 1975, p. 866; 1971b, p. 238).

First of all, we must be clear about a possible misunderstanding: Gramsci did not attribute a social formation the definition 'Western' based on geographical criteria, but on *historical* ones. In other words, Gramsci did not restrict himself to noting the synchronic existence of 'Eastern' and 'Western' formations, but also indicates the socio-historic, diachronic processes, which lead a social formation to become 'Westernised'. When he referred to the theory of 'permanent revolution' according to the definition given by Marx and Engels in 1850,² that is, 'as a scientifically evolved expression of the Jacobin experience', Gramsci remarked that 'the formula belongs to a historical period in which the great mass political parties and the great economic trade unions did not yet exist, and society was still, so to speak, in a state of fluidity in many regards'.³ Little by little, however, as the development of the processes of socialisation of productive forces lead to the socialisation of political participation, in which the 'fluidity' particular to the age of restricted-participation liberalism yields to the 'mass structure' of modern democracies – Gramsci marks the turning-point in 1870 – European societies tend to become 'Westernised', creating the need for a change in socialist strategy. As he concludes

...the Forty-Eightist formula of the 'Permanent Revolution' is expanded and transcended in political science by the formula of 'civil hegemony'. The same thing happens in the art of politics as happens in military art: war of movement increasingly becomes war of position...⁴

Two things must be highlighted in this note. First, we see that the need for a new strategy arose not only from the synchronic, simultaneous difference between 'Western' and 'Eastern' societies, but also from the diachronic difference – within societies now considered 'Western' – between periods marked by the weakness of the organisation of the masses (thus creating the need for 'war of movement', a frontal clash with the coercive state) and periods when the socialisation of politics is more intense (in which the steady capture of positions takes centre-stage in the workers' strategy). In this sense, the 'war of movement' would be applicable not only to absolutist or despotic states of the Eastern variety, but also to the élitist liberal states of the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century, whereas the 'war of position' would be valid for modern liberal-democratic states. (Naturally, this periodisation may have been valid for Europe, but not for other parts of the world: that does not deny, as we will see later on, that the 'Westernisation' processes, even if late, also happened in some of these areas, especially in

2. Marx and Engels 1978.

3. Gramsci 1975, p. 1566; 1971b, pp. 242–3.

4. Ibid.

Latin America.)⁵ Thus Gramsci's renewal/overcoming did not refer only to the concrete strategy applied by the Russian Bolsheviks in a society with an absolutist state, thus negating its universal applicability: it was also targeted also at a certain residual heritage of Auguste Blanqui present in Marx and Engels's formulations, particularly around 1848–50, when they were dealing with semi-absolutist states or liberal societies that were not yet fully 'Westernised'. Second, we must recall the correlation established by Gramsci between 'war of movement' and 'permanent revolution', on the one hand, and 'war of position' and the conquest of 'civil hegemony' on the other: the key to 'war of position', the proper strategy for 'Western' or 'Westernised' countries, lies precisely in the struggle for hegemony, political leadership or consensus. Or, to use Gramsci's own words,

A social group can, and indeed must, already exercise 'leadership' before winning governmental power (this indeed is one of the principal conditions for the winning of such power); it subsequently becomes dominant when it exercises power, but even if it holds it firmly in its grasp, it must continue to 'lead' as well.⁶

Gramsci's sharp perception of the historical transformations undergone by capitalist societies, which inevitably entailed the need for a renewal of the Marxist strategy for the transition to socialism at the theoretical level, must not obscure the fact that, as he formulated his theory, he was also fighting a *contemporary* political battle, precisely against those who did not pose the need for such renewal. He said:

The transition from the war of manoeuvre (frontal attack) to the war of position – in the political field as well – this seems to me to be the most important question of political theory that the post-war period has posed, and the most difficult to solve correctly.⁷

Shortly after this, he criticised Trotsky for insisting on defending the theory of 'permanent revolution', of frontal attack, 'in a period in which it only leads to defeats'.⁸

In order to underline the present relevance of Gramsci's political battle, it is interesting to observe that, even though his criticism was explicitly aimed at Trotsky, and (as we will see), at Rosa Luxemburg, he was actually opposing the whole political line followed by the Communist International in the years

5. See Appendix Three.

6. Gramsci 1975, pp. 2010–11; 1971b, pp. 57–8.

7. Gramsci 1975, pp. 801–2; 1971b, p. 238.

8. Ibid.

1929–34 as well; a line based, as is now well-known, on its false assumptions as to the imminent collapse of capitalism, and of the beginning of a world-revolutionary crisis (understood as ‘economic catastrophism’), which led to the conclusion that there was a need for frontal-attack tactics, all-out offensive, in which even social democracy should be treated as a ‘twin brother of Fascism’ and fought accordingly. It is not necessary to dwell, here, on the tragic results produced by the adventurist resumption of the ‘war of movement’ as a strategy of the ‘Western’ communist parties, ‘in a period in which it only leads to defeats’, as Gramsci insists. Writing as he did in 1930–2, when the now monolithically-Stalinist Communist International’s ultra-left turn was in full effect, it was impossible for Gramsci to be unaware that his attacks on Trotsky – by then politically defeated and exiled – were a far more fitting reproach to the International’s own policy.

Fighting at the same time both Trotskyism and Stalin’s ‘ultra-leftist turn’ after 1929, Gramsci remained faithful to the guidelines proposed by Lenin at the 1921 Third Congress of the Communist International, when ‘ultra-leftism’ was strongly condemned and the International proposed the policy of a ‘united front’ with other working-class and socialist forces, a policy that showed insight of the greater complexity of ‘Western’ societies, but that would be abandoned by Stalin precisely in the years 1928–9.

It seems to me that Ilitch [Lenin] understood that a change was necessary from the war of manoeuvre applied victoriously in the East in 1917, to a war of position which was the only form possible in the West.... This is what the formula of the ‘United Front’ seems to me to mean.⁹

Gramsci continues by concretely stating the central determination in the difference between East and West:

In the East the State was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous; in the West, there was a proper relation between State and civil society, and when the State trembled a sturdy structure of civil society was at once revealed. The State was only an outer ditch, behind which there stood a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks: more or less numerous from one State to the next, it goes without saying – but this precisely necessitated an accurate reconnaissance of each individual country.¹⁰

9. Gramsci 1975, p. 866; 1971b, p. 237.

10. Ibid. We must make an observation at this point. Contrary to the typical reading of Gramsci, it is not correct to suppose that in ‘Western’ societies the strengthening of civil society implies a weakening of the state. The ‘West’ is not the symmetrically-inverted image of the ‘East’: in the first, there is a ‘balanced relationship’ between the two moments of the superstructure, and that is why the extraordinary strength-

As we can see, the concept of 'civil society' brings forth here an essential concretisation regarding a similar 1924 formulation, already quoted in Chapter Three.

It is precisely this 'balanced relationship' between state and civil society that forbids, in the 'West', the overestimation of the role of economic crises in the process of disaggregation of the ruling bloc and, as a consequence, the fixation of socialist strategy on the idea of a 'revolutionary assault' on power. Gramsci's polemic now targeted Rosa Luxemburg, but his criticism of the great Polish revolutionary's economism and catastrophism is just as valid, and even more so, for the positions defended by the Communist International in the years 1929–34. Speaking against Luxemburg, Gramsci insisted on the fact that

at least in the case of the most advanced States, where 'civil society' has become a very complex structure and one which is resistant to the catastrophic 'incursions' of the immediate economic element (crises, depressions, etc.)... the superstructures of civil society are like the trench-systems of modern warfare.¹¹

This system of mediations – which implies a 'withdrawal of the economic barriers', that is, a greater autonomy of politics – makes the revolutionary crises in 'Western' societies a far more complex phenomenon. Such crises are no longer immediately manifested as the result of economic crises, even apparently catastrophic ones, and therefore do not require a rapid solution and a frontal attack; they articulate themselves over many levels, encompassing a more or less long historical period. This is why Gramsci used the notion of 'organic crisis' to define them, that is, a crisis that, unlike the 'occasional' or 'conjunctural' crises, excludes the possibility of a quick resolution by the ruling classes and signals the gradual dismantling of the old 'social bloc'.¹²

ening of the state that took place in late-capitalist societies – a phenomenon called 'authoritarian statism' in Poulantzas 1978 – does not deny their 'Western' nature, to the extent that the organisms of civil society remain strong and articulated, even though frequently in a liberal-corporatist fashion. Even 'classic' fascism, as a reactionary régime that requires a basis of *organised* masses, is a phenomenon characteristic of 'Western' societies.

11. Gramsci 1975, p. 1615; 1971b, p. 235.

12. We must note, by the way, that Gramsci used the word 'bloc' in two ways, distinct though dialectically-related: first, as a 'historical bloc', when he means the concrete totality formed by the articulation of the material infrastructure and the politico-ideological superstructures; second, as a 'social bloc', as an alliance of classes under the hegemony of a class fundamental to the mode of production, the goal of which is either to conserve or revolutionise an existing socio-economic formation. There is a dialectical connection between the two meanings to the extent that the construction of a 'social bloc' requires the creation of a new articulation between economics

If the 'organic crisis', in its economic aspect, presents itself as a manifestation of structural contradictions in the mode of production, in its politico-ideological, superstructural aspect it appears as a *crisis of hegemony*. Gramsci defines it thus:

If the ruling class has lost its consensus, i.e. is no longer 'leading' but only 'dominant', exercising coercive force alone, this means precisely that the great masses have become detached from their traditional ideologies, and no longer believe what they used to believe previously, etc. The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum, a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.¹³

The crisis of hegemony, as a political expression of the organic crisis, is the kind of revolutionary crisis specific to the more complex societies, with a high level of organised participation. Unlike the 'catastrophic crisis', it is characterised by the relatively long time it takes to mature, during which there is a complex struggle for spaces and positions, a movement of advances and retreats. Like every crisis, the crisis of hegemony may bring forth different alternatives, that is, it may have different solutions. At first, the ruling class may be able to continue its domination by purely coercive means; in the medium term, it can certainly rebuild its hegemony, for instance, through compromise and reformist manoeuvres counting on the inability of the opposing forces to present positive and constructive solutions. There is also the possibility that the dominated classes, benefiting from the structural nature of the crisis, broaden their set of alliances and their sphere of consensus, reverse the relations of hegemony in their favour and thus become *leading* classes (as they present proposals for the solution of the problems afflicting *the nation as a whole* and form a consensus around them), creating the conditions to become *ruling classes*. As against 'revolutionary impatience', Gramsci noted that action regarding this kind of crisis requires 'exceptional qualities of patience and inventiveness'.¹⁴

Therefore, in the 'war of position' that happens throughout a crisis of hegemony, either preparing it or providing it with a gradual solution, there is no place for the messianic wait for the 'great day', for the spontaneist passivity that relies on the unleashing of a catastrophic explosion as a condition for the 'assault on power'. The main criterion for the resolution of the crisis is the

and politics, between infrastructure and superstructure. On the determinations of the concept of the 'historical bloc', a didactic explanation can be found in Portelli 1972.

13. Gramsci 1975, p. 311; 1971b, pp. 275–6. On Gramsci's concept of crisis, see Portantiero 1983, pp. 147–75.

14. Gramsci 1975, p. 802; 1971b, p. 239.

initiative of collective political subjects, the ability to *act politically*, to include large masses in the solution of their own problems, to struggle day-to-day for spaces and positions without losing sight of the final goal, that is, to bring forth structural transformations that put an end to the socio-economic capitalist formation. If the economic crisis does not translate itself spontaneously into the disaggregation of the ruling bloc (in certain conditions, it may even favour a re-aggregation of the bloc), this means the disaggregation depends directly on the ability of the dominated class to *act politically*; in other words, to gradually conquer for itself the hegemony that was lost or is about to be lost to the ruling class. So it is that the conquest of hegemony, the transformation of the dominated classes into leading classes *before* seizing power is the central element in Gramsci's strategy for the transition to socialism, a strategy that is not only imposed by the greater complexity of 'Western' societies, but also has the advantage of providing safer and more stable results, for, as Gramsci said, 'the "war of position", once won, is decisive for once and for all'.¹⁵ It is relevant to recall that, as Gramsci had indicated since the mid-1920s, in order to become the leading, hegemonic class, the working class must become a *national class*, that is, it must overcome all corporatist spirit and assume all the real problems of the nation as its own. As we will see in the next chapter, there is a decisive role to be played in the transformation of the working class into a national class by the political party that represents it, that is, by what Gramsci calls (after Machiavelli) 'the modern prince'.

Soon after the passage in which Gramsci notes Lenin's insight on the historical necessity of passing from the war of movement to the war of position, he says:

Ilich, however, did not have time to expand his formula – though it should be borne in mind that he could only have expanded it theoretically, whereas the fundamental task was a national one; that is to say it required a reconnaissance of the terrain and identification of the elements of trench and fortress represented by the elements of civil society.¹⁶

Indeed, this excerpt from Gramsci may also be read as a work-programme: throughout the *Notebooks*, he attempts to do what Lenin 'did not have time' to do. First, he undertakes a deeper *theoretical* discussion, with his extended theory of the state, the formulation of the difference between 'Eastern' and 'Western' formations, the concepts of 'war of position', 'organic crisis', and so on. Second, he engages in a *deep reconnaissance* of the Italian '*national terrain*',

15. Gramsci 1975, p. 802; 1971b, p. 239.

16. Gramsci 1975, p. 866; 1971b, p. 238.

with his detailed studies on the particular process of transition to capitalism in Italy (by means of a 'passive revolution' or a 'revolution without revolution'), on the national centrality of the southern and Vatican questions, on the cosmopolitan and non-national-popular nature of Italian culture and intellectuals, and so on. In this reconnaissance of the 'national terrain', a special place is occupied by Gramsci's formulations on the 'transitional phase' which, in his eyes, should take place between the fall of Fascism and the socialist revolution in Italy. This is a question worthy of closer examination, not just because of its intrinsic interest, but also because here we find one example (maybe the only one) of a concrete application by Gramsci himself of the general principles of his new transition-strategy to a concrete national situation.

6.2. On the concept of passive revolution

Before we examine Gramsci's attempt to apply to Italy the socialist strategy he sees as fitting for the 'West', I believe it is important to draw attention to one of his main historical-political concepts, namely 'passive revolution'. Gramsci first employed it as an instrument for a 'reconnaissance of the Italian national terrain', but later he used it in a more general fashion, to explain broad historical periods as well. At present, the literature on Gramsci is almost unanimous in acknowledging the special place occupied by the notion of 'passive revolution' or 'revolution-restoration' in the reflections contained in the *Notebooks*.¹⁷ However, there are many who mistakenly identify this category with that of 'war of position', or who ascribe to Gramsci a positive understanding of the concept, as if it were adequate to the socialist strategy for the West.¹⁸ So, before we continue, it is necessary to clarify what Gramsci meant by 'passive revolution'.

The phrase was taken from the Neapolitan historian Vincenzo Cuoco, but Gramsci gave it a new content. For him, it is a key instrument for analysing the events of the *Risorgimento*, that is, the formation of the modern bourgeois state in Italy. The concept, however, is also used as a criterion for interpreting whole historical periods, as diverse as the post-Napoleonic Restoration, Fascism and Americanism. Later authors who took their inspiration from Gramsci's reflections assumed the possibility of such generalisation. I shall

17. Even though they were published in the 1970s, it is particularly worth reading Buci-Glucksmann 1977 and De Felice 1977. It is significant that two of the most important contributions to the theme come from Latin America, a region marked by passive revolutions: see Kanoussi and Mena 1985, and Vianna 1997.

18. See, among others, Vianna 1997, pp. 28–88; and, albeit with greater caution, Kebir 2001, pp. 49–54.

name only a few. Christine Buci-Glucksmann and Göran Therborn based their analysis of the action of European social democracy and the building of the welfare-state on the concept of passive revolution.¹⁹ Dora Kanoussi, after posing it as the central concept in Gramsci's thought, goes as far as to say that it is possible to understand modernity as a whole as passive revolution.²⁰ More recently, Giuseppe Chiarante used the concept to define post-Fascist democracy in Italy as a peculiar case of passive revolution.²¹ The notion of passive revolution was also used in the attempt to conceptualise fundamental moments of Brazilian history.²² Without discussing here the merits (or lack thereof) of such uses of the concept and others, we must admit that they are methodologically authorised by Gramsci himself, since he was the first to extend the notion of passive revolution to whole different historical periods.

But what are the main characteristics of a passive revolution, according to Gramsci? Contrary to a popular, 'Jacobin' revolution, made from below – which, for that reason, radically breaks with the old political and social order – a passive revolution always implies the presence of two moments: 'restoration' (always a conservative reaction to the possibility of an effective and radical transformation coming from 'below') and 'renewal' (as some of the popular demands are answered 'from above' by means of 'compromises' made by the ruling classes). In this sense, though Gramsci spoke of Italy, he indicated universal characteristics of all passive revolutions when he said that a revolution of this sort manifests

the historical fact that a unitary popular initiative was missing from the development of Italian history together with the other fact that this development took place as the reaction of the dominant classes to the sporadic, elementary and non-organic rebelliousness of the popular masses together with 'restorations' that accepted a certain part of the demands expressed from below, and were thus 'progressive restorations' or 'revolutions-restorations' or even 'passive revolutions'.²³

The restoration-aspect does not, therefore, deny the fact that some actual modifications also take place. Passive revolution is not, therefore, synonymous with counter-reformation, much less with counter-revolution; actually, in a passive revolution, what we are looking at is a reformism 'from above'.²⁴ In another passage, Gramsci says:

19. Buci-Glucksmann and Therborn 1981, p. 138 ff. and 180 ff.

20. Kanoussi 2000, p. 141.

21. Chiarante 1997, p. 38 ff.

22. See, among others, Appendix Three, and Vianna, pp. 12–27.

23. Gramsci 1975, pp. 1324–5; 1995, pp. 373–4.

24. Buci-Glucksmann and Therborn, 1981, characterised the welfare-state as 'state-reformism'.

One may apply to the concept of passive revolution (documenting it from the Italian Risorgimento) the interpretative criterion of molecular changes which in fact progressively modify the pre-existing composition of forces, and hence become the matrix of new changes.²⁵

Later, and mostly in his polemics against the Croce of the *Storia d'Europa nel secolo XIX*, Gramsci extended his concept and stated that the *Risorgimento* was part of a broader passive revolution, reaching throughout Europe, that characterised the whole historical period that started with the post-Napoleonic Restoration. At that time, the new ruling classes, formed after the alliance between various sectors of the bourgeoisie and the old strata of big landowners, reacted against the most radical consequences of the French Revolution, even though they introduced many of its conquests from above, against the popular masses. This was the time of the consolidation and expansion of liberalism, though in overt opposition to democracy. Gramsci did not hesitate to say that Croce's anti-democratic liberalism was nothing but an ideology that sought to justify and validate passive revolution.

There would be another period of passive revolution, according to Gramsci, when the bourgeoisie reacted against the October Revolution, trying to adopt some of its conquests, such as elements of planned economy, with the purpose of neutralising it. This new period would manifest itself in two of the main phenomena of the first post-war years, namely Fascism and Americanism. Gramsci was clear when he spoke of Fascism considered as a blend of conservation and change:

There is a passive revolution involved in the fact that – through the legislative intervention of the State, and by means of the corporative organisation – relatively far-reaching modifications are being introduced into the country's economic structure in order to accentuate the 'plan of production' element; in other words, that socialisation and co-operation in the sphere of production are being increased, *without however touching (or at least not going beyond the regulation and control of) individual and group appropriation of profit*. In the concrete framework of Italian social relations, this could be the only solution whereby to develop the productive forces of industry under the direction of the traditional ruling classes, ... What is important from the political and ideological point of view is that it is capable of creating – and indeed does create – a period of expectation and hope, especially in certain Italian social groups such as the great mass of urban and rural petit bourgeois. It thus reinforces the hegemonic system and

25. Gramsci 1975, p. 1767; 1971b, p. 109.

the forces of military and civil coercion at the disposal of the traditional ruling classes.²⁶

Speaking of Americanism, Gramsci was more cautious:

In generic terms one could say that Americanism and Fordism derive from an inherent necessity to achieve the organisation of a planned economy, ... The question of whether Americanism can constitute an historical 'epoch', that is, whether it can determine a gradual evolution of the same type as the 'passive revolution' ... or whether on the other hand it does not simply represent the molecular accumulation of elements destined to produce an 'explosion', that is, an upheaval on the French pattern.²⁷

In the case of Americanism, then, Gramsci spoke of passive revolution, but he expressed doubt; I believe, however, that his argument would unfold in such a way as to consider Americanism precisely as a 'historical period' of passive revolution. A period that, incidentally, would – as effectively demonstrated by Buci-Glucksmann and Therborn – have its peak in the welfare-state, in which we see an escalation of certain characteristics Gramsci had already highlighted in Americanism, such as the growth of mass-consumption and the direct intervention of the state in the economy. We must also recall that on this point, Gramsci revealed remarkable foresight: in 1932, three years after the beginning of a full crisis of capitalism, he insisted on the expansionist powers of Americanism in comparison with Fascism – a proposition that put him in total disagreement with the Third International, which saw the crisis as heralding the final collapse of capitalism.

Gramsci drew attention to two consequences of passive revolution: on the one hand, the strengthening of the state to the detriment of civil society, or, more concretely, the preponderance of dictatorial forms of supremacy to the detriment of hegemonic forms; on the other, the practice of transformism as a mode of historical development, a process that, as it co-opts the political and cultural representation of the popular masses, seeks to exclude the latter from all effective historical protagonism. On the strengthening of the state, Gramsci notes, after examining the role of Piedmont in the *Risorgimento*:

This fact is of the greatest importance for the concept of 'passive revolution' – the fact, that is, that what was involved was not a social group which 'led' other groups, but a State which, even though it had limitations as a power, 'led' the group which should have been 'leading'. ... The important thing is to analyse more profoundly the significance of a 'Piedmont'-type function

26. Gramsci 1975, p. 1228; 1971b, pp. 119–20.

27. Gramsci 1975, pp. 2139–40; 1971b, pp. 279–80.

in passive revolutions – i.e. the fact that a State replaces the local social groups in leading a struggle of renewal.²⁸

Based on the theory of the extended state, Gramsci did not hesitate to draw the political consequences of such a replacement:

It is one of the cases in which these groups have the function of 'domination' without that of 'leadership': dictatorship without hegemony. The hegemony will be exercised by a part of the social group over the entire group, and not by the latter over other forces in order to give power to the movement, radicalise it, etc. on the 'Jacobin' model.²⁹

'Dictatorship without hegemony', however, does not mean that the state acting as the protagonist of a passive revolution can do without a minimum of consensus; if that were the case, it should always employ coercion and only coercion; in the long run, this would make it impossible for the state to function. It was Gramsci himself who indicated how to achieve such minimal, passive consensus, in the case of equally 'passive' processes of transition from above. Although he is referring to Italy, his remarks are valid for other countries as well:

Transformism as one of the historical forms of what has already been noted about 'revolution-restoration' or 'passive revolution'... Two periods of transformism: 1. from 1860 to 1900 'molecular' transformism, i.e. individual political figures formed by the democratic opposition parties are incorporated individually into the conservative-moderate 'political class' (characterised by its aversion to any intervention of the popular masses in state life, to any organic reform which would substitute a 'hegemony' for the crude, dictatorial 'dominance'); 2. from 1900 onwards transformism of entire groups of leftists who pass over to the moderate camp.³⁰

The concept of passive revolution is, therefore, an important *criterion of interpretation* to be applied not only to the main episodes of the history of Italy and of other countries, but also to whole historical periods. I must stress the phrase 'criterion of interpretation', because Gramsci very clearly rejected the possibility that the subaltern classes could use passive revolution as a programme:

Hence theory of the 'passive revolution' not as a programme, as it was for the Italian liberals of the Risorgimento, but as a criterion of interpretation, in the absence of other active elements to a dominant extent.³¹

28. Gramsci 1975, p. 1823; 1971b, p. 105.

29. Ibid.

30. Gramsci 1975, p. 962; 1971b, p. 58.

31. Gramsci 1975, 1827; 1971b, p. 114.

It is true, however, that Gramsci did pose the following question in another note:

Does there exist an absolute identity between war of position and passive revolution? Or at least does there exist, or can there be conceived, an entire historical period in which the two concepts must be considered identical. ...The 'restorations' need to be judged 'dynamically.'³²

I believe that this passage, speaking as it does of 'restorations', must be interpreted as follows: in a time when 'war of movement' has been replaced by 'war of position' – that is, in already 'Westernised' societies – the ruling classes try to face this new form of struggle with passive revolutions (such was the case with Fascism and Americanism); but this means precisely that, if the subaltern classes accept this terrain of struggle, then they are condemned to inevitable defeat. Even though its process follows a war of position, the socialist revolution in the 'West' will have to be a revolution of the 'Jacobin' kind, that is, coming from below and based on the *active* consensus of those at the bottom.

6.3. From Gramsci's proposal of a 'constituent assembly' to Togliatti's 'progressive democracy'

All information and all testimonies available today unanimously confirm the fact that Gramsci radically disagreed with the position taken by the PCd'I beginning with the 'turn' of 1929, that is, the adoption and application in Italy of the adventurist and ultra-leftist political line approved by the Stalinist leadership of the Communist International at its Sixth Congress. We have seen the extent to which the prison-notes make this disagreement clear, through indirect polemics against Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg, rather than the Communist International itself. We must examine now – briefly – the reasons behind Gramsci's opposition to the national consequences that the new PCd'I leadership – headed by Togliatti – drew from the CI's 'turn'.³³ Based on the ostensible symptoms of the decline of the Fascist régime, the PCd'I began anticipating the emergence of an imminent revolutionary crisis in Italy as early as 1929. Therefore, intermediate goals (such as the 'republican assembly based on workers' and peasants' councils' proposed by Gramsci in 1925) were no longer on the agenda, but rather the dictatorship of the proletariat, to be established by means of an 'assault on power' in the form

32. Gramsci 1975, p. 1767; 1971b, p. 108.

33. On the Communist International's 'turn' and its consequences for the PCd'I, see Spriano 1969, pp. 210–338.

of an insurrection. The polemics against the liberal-democratic anti-Fascist parties became more aggravated; the Socialist Party was now the main target for attack, in line with the Stalinist theory of 'social fascism' (that is, of social democracy as 'the left wing of Fascism', and even more dangerous than Fascism itself, given its power to mystify the proletarian masses).

Gramsci openly disagreed with the newly-adopted political line.³⁴ According to the recollections of Bruno Tosin, who in 1930 and 1931 lived in the same prison in Turi as Gramsci, he did not agree with the CI's opinion on the situation in Italy: he did not believe it was a revolutionary situation, the outcome of which would necessarily lead to a proletarian insurrection. Neither did he think it correct to affirm that the bourgeois or reformist parties of the anti-Fascist opposition were preparing for a convergence with Mussolini's régime, as the leaders of the International stated. In his opinion, Fascism would certainly bring about discontent, especially among workers, peasants and the middle-classes; but such discontent, though clearly expressed in stances against a monarchy that was identified with Fascism and oppression, would hardly lead to an unambiguous socialist stance, favouring the dictatorship of the proletariat. Everything indicated that, in the face of such discontent, the liberal-democratic and reformist parties would strengthen their opposition to Mussolini (instead of converging with Fascism), and so the possibility of substituting a liberal-democratic régime for Fascism seemed very high.³⁵ Gramsci thus proved himself faithful not only to objective reality, but also to his old conception: everything suggested there would be an intermediate, liberal-democratic stage between the fall of Fascism and the establishment of socialism.

Gramsci went further still: in his discussions of the 'turn', he believed he had discovered in the PCd'I a return to the old maximalist tendencies, which he had battled so much – victoriously – during the years 1924–6. Bordiga, accused of Trotskyism, had just been expelled from the PCd'I, but the reign of the maximalist spirit of Bordigism apparently did not end there (Angelo Tasca had been expelled at the same time; he had aligned with Bukharin and so was accused of a 'rightist' deviation). The PCd'I insisted on letting itself be guided by an 'all or nothing' type of policy, focusing its tactics on 'war of movement' and frontal attack at a time when, as Gramsci said, 'it could

34. So did Umberto Terracini, a comrade of Gramsci during the time of *L'Ordine Nuovo* and another important Communist leader to be imprisoned. Terracini himself spoke of his experiences in this time, discussing how Gramsci was isolated in prison by his party-comrades for disagreeing with the Communist International. See Terracini 1978, pp. 81–131.

35. Tosin 1976, pp. 93–106.

only lead to defeats'. As Gramsci opposed the 1929–30 turn, he reaffirmed the principles that inspired his own Leninist and anti-Bordigist 'turn' in 1924: it is necessary to *act politically*, to intervene actively in reality, instead of passively waiting for the 'great day'. Let us see how Tosin summarises Gramsci's considerations on the topic:

According to Gramsci, it is empty maximalism to speak of broad mass-movements, strikes and even general strikes [as the PCd'I's new leadership did at the time]. Before we truly reach a revolutionary situation, it is necessary to work long and hard among the masses, using slogans that are simple and easy to understand, towards intermediate goals: for instance, one can pose the constitutional issue before the workers, the peasants and the middle-classes. A common action with all anti-Fascist groups must be sought, aiming at overthrowing the monarchy and Mussolini's régime, with the republic as a slogan. Finally, he thinks it not only possible, but also inevitable, that there will be a more or less long period of transition, with the formation of a constituent assembly, which can also be the prelude to a Soviet Republic of Workers and Peasants.³⁶

Athos Lisa, another of Gramsci's prison-associates (freed in 1933), confirmed our author's words when he communicated the positions of the imprisoned leader to the party-leadership: 'The first step towards leading these social strata [peasants, petty bourgeois] consists in leading them to take a position regarding the institutional and constitutional issue. The uselessness of the Crown is presently understood by all workers, even the most backwards peasants from Basilicata and Sardinia'.

The struggle for the constituent assembly appears as an opportunity not only for promoting an alliance with other forces, for 'acting politically', but also for conquering positions in the battle for the hegemony of the working class. Yet according to Lisa's report, Gramsci also said,

Therefore, the Party's tactics must focus on this particular goal, without fear of sounding insufficiently revolutionary. It must take upon itself, even before the other parties fighting against Fascism do, the slogan of the 'constituent assembly', not as an end, but as a means. The 'constituent assembly' represents the form of organisation within which the stronger demands of the active working class can be put forward; within which the action of the Party, through its own representatives, can and must be made explicit, aiming at demystifying all programmes for peaceful reform, and

36. Tosin 1976, p. 98.

showing to the Italian working class that the only possible solution for Italy lies in the proletarian revolution.³⁷

The need for a constituent assembly as a stage in the 'war of position' for socialism was a conviction Gramsci held throughout his prison-years: already in 1935 he had asked his friend Piero Sraffa to advance the same recommendation in the Party, recalling that the constituent assembly was the Italian form of the 'popular front' proposed at the Seventh Congress of the Communist International, when the previous ultra-leftist strategy had finally been abandoned.³⁸

We should not ascribe to Gramsci, however, that which belongs to his successors, particularly to Togliatti. Certainly Gramsci, during his prison-years, did not have the broad and articulated view of this intermediate stage – a democratic 'period of transition' – that, especially after 1944, with the experiences of the 'Popular Fronts' and the coalition of democratic countries against Nazi-Fascism, would appear in Palmiro Togliatti's formulations of the concept of 'progressive democracy', that is, of a democratic-republican régime that, thanks to the dialectical articulation between the traditional organisms of democratic representation (for instance, parliaments) and the new institutions of direct democracy (for instance, factory- and district-councils), would allow for the *progressive* advance towards profound social and economic transformations, for the permanent conquest of positions advancing towards socialism. In 1945, Togliatti said:

We answer without hesitation those who ask us what kind of republic do we want: we want a workers' democratic republic, we want a republic that remains within the scope of democracy, in which all reforms having a social content take place in due consideration of the democratic method.³⁹

37. Lisa 1974, pp. 82–95. A detailed and objective account of the difficult relationship between Gramsci and the PCd'I during his prison-years can be found in Spriano 1977. The documents presented by Spriano debunk the reckless allegations in Macciocchi 1974, p. 40 ff., according to which Gramsci was expelled and even persecuted by the PCd'I. Written with the extravagant purpose of 'proving' that Gramsci is 'the Mao of the West', Macciocchi's book is, in general terms, a good example of a lack of intellectual seriousness. Unfortunately, many so-called 'revisionists' have joined the Macciocchi school, seeking to demonstrate an insurmountable difference between Gramsci and Togliatti. For a documented critique of these positions, see Pistillo 2001 and Giacomini 2003.

38. Spriano 1969, p. 285.

39. Togliatti 1974b, pp. 440–1. It is interesting to note that even though the publication of Gramsci's *Notebooks* only began in 1948, Togliatti – one of the organisers of the first edition – had already come into direct contact with them in 1938, one year after Gramsci's death. On this, see Vacca 1994, pp. 123–69, a well-documented essay.

In Togliatti's formulation, therefore, political democracy was no longer seen a stage to be completed and abandoned when the time for the 'assault on power' comes, when the so-called 'great day' arrives, and becomes a set of conquests to be conserved and brought to a higher level – that is, *dialectically* overcome – in socialist democracy.

Surely Gramsci's formulations on the role of a constituent assembly in the transition from Fascism to socialism already indicate an attempt, even if timid and insufficient, to concretise tactically his remarkable strategic discoveries. However, it would fall to Gramsci's heirs, who worked in more favourable historical conditions, to transform the indications of the great Sardinian Marxist into a consistent and articulated set of concrete political and ideological formulations. The novelty of such formulations,⁴⁰ however, cannot and must not make us forget their deep link of dialectical continuity with Gramsci's prison-reflections. Ingrao, one of the most lucid Italian Communist leaders, correctly notes:

The fact that Gramsci is our present reference is not a question of philology, nor a liturgical rite. It is a contact with the most advanced theoretical research accomplished after the proletarian and popular defeats of the 1920s, within the international workers' movement and, specifically, within the complex of forces connected with the Third International.⁴¹

In a world no longer the same as Gramsci's, the modernity and the effectiveness of a socialist party depend largely on its ability to creatively assimilate the universal elements contained in Gramsci's political theory.

40. Among such novelties is the concretisation of the concept of hegemony by means of its articulation with pluralism: 'Today we speak of hegemony and pluralism. Let us put it more precisely: hegemony of the working class within pluralism; struggle for the hegemony of the working class made explicit in pluralism. This formula does not restrict itself to indicating a direction for the working class that is based on consensus; it is a formula that already points to a specific *political and governmental form of consensus*' (Ingrao 1977, p. 240).

41. Ingrao 1977, p. 241. On the relations between Gramsci and his Italian heirs, see Liguori 1996, p. 87 ff.

Chapter Seven

The Party as ‘Collective Intellectual’

The theory of the political party of the working class – the assimilation of which was, as we have seen, one of the essential points in Gramsci’s formation during the pre-prison years – occupies a similarly important place in the *Notebooks*. Gramsci actually intended to make it the subject of a particular study that, inspired by Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, would systematise the distinctive features of the modern revolutionary party, the communist party, referred to by Gramsci as ‘the Modern Prince’. Contrasting with Machiavelli’s work, Gramsci’s first innovation was that ‘the Modern Prince’, the agent of transformative collective will, could no longer be personified by an individual. In modern, more complex societies, the roles Machiavelli ascribed to a singular person must be played by a *social organism*. Gramsci, being a materialist, had no intention of ‘inventing’ such an organism, as ‘History has already provided this organism, and it is the political party’,¹ that is, one of the most characteristic elements in the network of organisations of which modern civil society is composed.

There is a very clear link between Gramsci’s formulations on ‘the Modern Prince’ and Lenin’s theory of the party. Perhaps this is one of the concrete topics in political philosophy that, in spite of significant differences in emphasis, Gramsci’s capacity for renewal with regard to Lenin’s legacy is less

1. Gramsci 1975, p. 1558; 1971b, p. 129.

evident. (This renewal – a necessary one, at that – will become even clearer in Togliatti's formulations on the 'new party', presented in close connection with the concept of 'progressive democracy, beginning in 1944.)² The first point of continuity between Gramsci and Lenin appears in the very function both ascribed to the party in its relationship with the social class. Anyone who has read *What Is to Be Done?* will recall the basic, universal, not specifically 'Russian' elements in Lenin's conception of the party. Among these elements of universal reach, a special place is taken by Lenin's understanding that the basic task of the workers' party, the party of the socialist revolution, is to contribute to overcoming a merely trade-unionist working-class consciousness. For that, it must provide the theoretical and organisational elements needed for such consciousness to rise above the level of *class*-consciousness, that is, to *the level of totality*, to understanding not just the immediate conflict over salaries between bosses and workers (a conflict that does not put the wage-labourer/capitalist relationship into question), but, rather, the global *political* links of the working class with the other classes of society, be they opponents, allies or potential allies. Only at this level, thanks to the mediation of the party, is the working class able to directly confront the issue of the state, the issue of power.³

Translating this into Gramsci's own words, the task of the 'Modern Prince' would lie in overcoming the corporatist residue (the 'egoistic-passional' moments) of the working class, and contributing to the formation of a *national-popular collective will*, that is, a degree of consciousness that would allow for a political initiative encompassing all of a nation's social strata and touch on the differentiated universality of the complex of social relations. Thus the party appears as a fundamental objectivation of the 'cathartic moment' recalled by Gramsci, whose clear statement that 'In the parties necessity has already become freedom'⁴ is not merely incidental. The party, therefore, is not a corporatist organism – 'A tradesman does not join a political party in order to

2. On this, see Togliatti 1967, pp. 135–55 and pp. 157–82. In spite of the great interest of these works by Togliatti, one should be warned that they stress too greatly the moment of continuity between Gramsci and Lenin, and cast aside the decisive moment of renewal. I agree with Liguori (Togliatti 1967, p. 26) when he says that, in Togliatti's view, 'it was exactly the specificities that prevented Gramsci from being included in a purely Leninist context that remained in the shadows, since Gramsci is not a 'variation' of Leninism, but rather the author of a theory and a strategy that surely have historical connections with those of the Bolshevik leader, but that are also significant in themselves'. Such autonomy is far more pronounced regarding the theory of the state and of revolution than the theory of the party.

3. Lenin 1961.

4. Gramsci 1975, p. 920; 1971b, p. 267.

do business, nor an industrialist in order to produce more at lower cost',⁵ and so on – but rather a 'cathartic', universalising organism:

In the political party the elements of an economic social group get beyond that moment of their historical development and become agents of more general activities of a national and international character.⁶

If the party, as a collective organism, represents the elevation of part of the class – its vanguard – from the economico-corporatist stage to the political stage, from particularity to universality, it is only natural that the same elevation – although at different levels – also occurs in each of its individual members. In other words, not only is the party *as such* an objectivation of the 'cathartic moment' and a structural substantiation, but each individual person, upon entering the party, realises completely or partially this 'moment', and becomes able to act with more freedom and consciousness in the society in which he or she lives.

Just as Lenin thought the immediate experience of the conflict between bosses and workers, being the result of a particularist and repetitive praxis, led only to a limited, 'trade-unionist' consciousness, Gramsci similarly believed that fixation with the economico-corporatist moment kept consciousness at the level of passivity, of objective impotence in the face of social necessity. The overtness and the conflict of corporate interests ultimately leads to the reproduction of the existing socio-economic formation. It is the passage to the 'ethico-political' moment – to the 'consciousness brought from outside' (outside economic praxis, not outside the broad total praxis that encompasses society as a whole) in Lenin's words – and only this passage that can allow the proletariat to overcome its corporatist divisions and become a national leading hegemonic class.⁷ For Gramsci, the possibility of becoming an hegemonic class is embodied precisely by the ability to elaborate systematically and homogeneously a national-popular collective will; and only when such a collective will is formed is it possible to build and consolidate a new revolutionary 'social bloc', within which the working class (now free of corporatism) assumes the role of leading class. In his understanding, the homogeneous

5. Gramsci 1975, p. 1522; 1971b, p. 16.

6. Ibid.

7. Marx and Engels had already pointed to this central feature of the communist party: 'The Communists are distinguished from the other working-class parties by this only: 1. In the national struggles of the proletarians of the different countries, they point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of all nationality. 2. In the various stages of development which the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie has to pass through, they always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement as a whole' (Marx and Engels 1969).

construction of this collective will is the primary task of the political party: then, the role of *synthesis* and of *mediation* taken on by the party appears clearly, not only as a function of the various individual organisms of the working class (for instance, unions), but also of the various institutions of the other lower classes. Thanks to the mediation of the party, these organisms and institutions become articulations of the single body of the new 'historical bloc'. (We still do not find in Gramsci the explicit idea that such mediation could be done by *more than one* party; this is an idea that would only grow in the theoretical work of his followers, particularly in Togliatti's theory of 'progressive democracy' and 'the new party'.)

Though Gramsci 'flirted', at certain moments, with Georges Sorel's terminology, no one should assume that he has a subjectivist or voluntarist conception of the formation of the collective will, as if it were nothing but the construction of an 'idea-force' or of a 'myth' that could mobilise the class, without having anything to do with objective concrete reality (as in Sorel's 'general-strike' myth).⁸ Gramsci conceived this collective will as 'operative awareness of historical necessity',⁹ that is, as necessity raised to consciousness and converted into transformative praxis. Since a collective will can only be aroused and developed when the necessary objective conditions are present, the party must have 'a historical (economic) analysis of the social structure of the given country'¹⁰ in order to prepare a political line that is able to have a real effect on reality.

This is how Gramsci's important remarks on 'Spontaneity and Conscious Leadership'¹¹ must be read. In them, Gramsci took an unequivocal stance against the fetish of spontaneity, criticising those who either refuse or undermine the persistent, daily struggle to give spontaneous movements a conscious leadership, that is, a politico-intellectual synthesis able to overcome the elements of corporatism and to transform these movements into something homogeneous, universal, capable of effective and lasting action. However, he did not believe that the collective will can be aroused only 'from above', by an arbitrary act of the party, without considering 'the "spontaneous" feelings of the masses'.¹² He wrote that these feelings must be 'educated, directed, purified',¹³ but never ignored.

8. For a study of the relationship between Gramsci and Sorel, see Badaloni 1975.

9. Gramsci 1975, p. 1485; 1971b, p. 130.

10. Ibid.

11. Gramsci 1975, pp. 328–32; 1971b, pp. 196–200.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

This unity between 'spontaneity' and 'conscious leadership' or 'discipline' is precisely the real political action of the subaltern classes, *in so far as this is mass politics and not merely an adventure* by groups claiming to represent the masses.¹⁴

Besides, it is not necessary to insist on the fact that the struggle for the unity between mass-movement and conscious leadership, this moment of 'disciplinary' *synthesis*, of politico-universal *mediation*, is the main task of the party, a party already conceived by Gramsci as a mass-party, and not as a doctrinaire and adventurist sect. Overcoming Bordiga's doctrinaire sectarianism (seemingly, Gramsci was directing the preceding observations against him), and also Sorel's and Rosa Luxemburg's spontaneism, Gramsci once again here finds the appropriate dialectic between objectivity and subjectivity, between spontaneity and consciousness, which lies at the base of the non-'dated' core of Lenin's theory of the party.

The formation of a collective will is organically linked to that which Gramsci often called 'intellectual and moral reform'. The party does not fight just for a political, economic and social renewal, but also for a cultural revolution, for the creation and development of a new culture. Gramsci argues that

The modern Prince must be and cannot but be the proclaimer and organiser of an intellectual and moral reform, which also means creating the terrain for a subsequent development of the national-popular collective will towards the realisation of a superior, total form of modern civilisation.¹⁵

Here, Gramsci brings to a higher level his earlier concerns with cultural work, the battle of ideas. Unlike most Marxists of his time, he was fully aware that the cultural front – together with the economic and political fronts – is a decisive terrain in the struggle of the subaltern classes.

However, if the strategy for the transition to socialism in the 'West' implies an intense effort to achieve hegemony, consensus and political leadership *before* taking power, then the cultural battle – a fundamental moment of the aggregation of consensus – takes on decisive importance. Without a new culture, the subaltern classes will continue to suffer the hegemony of the old ruling classes passively and will not be able to rise to the condition of leading classes. Gramsci always said that *political* leadership is also, ineluctably, an *ideological* leadership: as the 'Modern Prince' struggles to spread a new culture *en masse* – a culture that brings together and synthesises the higher moments of the culture of the past, bringing together the intellectual depth

14. Ibid.

15. Gramsci 1975, p. 560; 1971b, pp. 132–3.

of the Renaissance with the popular and mass-nature of the Reformation – it creates the conditions for the hegemony of the subaltern classes, for their victory in the 'war of position' for socialism.

Furthermore, as the full construction of the new 'regulated' or communist society implies, for Gramsci, the end of the division between rulers and ruled, that is, the absorption of the coercive state by the consensual mechanisms of civil society, it is indispensable to suppress not only the private appropriation of the means of production of material wealth, but also to eliminate the private or élitist appropriation of knowledge and culture. This is the only way to end the division between 'the intellectuals' and 'ordinary people' and thus suppress the group (bureaucratic) appropriation of the mechanisms of power. 'Intellectual and moral reform' thus has a second aspect: a necessary condition for achieving hegemony in the complex 'Western' capitalist societies, it is also a decisive element in the battle for the end of 'statolatry' or 'the government of functionaries' within socialism, that is, it is decisive for the struggle to dissolve the coercive state and to establish the resulting 'self-government of the associated producers'.

The decisive place occupied by 'intellectual and moral reform' in Gramsci's reflections would determine the great role he ascribed to intellectuals in the formation and establishment of the political party. Gramsci wrote that 'all members of a political party should be regarded as intellectuals',¹⁶ not because of their erudition, but because of the *function* they have as party-members, 'which is one of leadership and organisation, i.e. educative, i.e. intellectual'.¹⁷ This is why Togliatti, in an apt interpretation of Gramsci's thought, referred to the working-class party as the 'collective intellectual'.¹⁸ However, if we examine Gramsci's conception of the intellectuals themselves, perhaps it would not be an exaggeration to reverse Togliatti's statement and say that, for Gramsci, the intellectual, too, has functions that are similar to those of a political party. This close link between the intellectuals' function and the political party's function led French scholar Jean-Marc Piotte to aptly note that

the party corresponds so well to the notion of intellectual that one would believe Gramsci had defined the intellectual in relation to the party and having the party in mind. The study of the party would therefore be the best way to understand the notion of intellectual.¹⁹

16. Gramsci 1975, p. 1523; 1971b, p. 16.

17. Ibid.

18. Togliatti 2001, p. 230.

19. Piotte 1970, p. 71.

According to Gramsci, there are two basic kinds of intellectuals. First, we have the 'organic intellectual', whose appearance is closely connected with the emergence of a social class determinant for the economic mode of production, and whose function is to endow this class with homogeneity and consciousness, 'not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields'. Second, we have the 'traditional intellectuals', which, having in the past been a category of organic intellectuals of a certain class (for instance, priests as regards the feudal nobility), presently constitute a relatively autonomous and independent stratum.²⁰ The important thing to stress, here, is that both types objectively perform functions analogous to that of the political party: they homogenise the class-consciousness to which they are organically connected (or, in the case of 'traditional' intellectuals, to the classes to which they adhere) and thus prepare the hegemony of this class over the ensemble of its allies. They are, in sum, agents of the consolidation of a collective will, of a 'social bloc'.

So, already in his 1926 essay on the 'Southern Question', Gramsci showed how the hegemony of the landowners over the southern peasants took place not through a political party, but through the stratum of middle-ranking rural intellectuals, which, led ideologically by Croce and Giuseppe Fortunato, aggregated the atomised peasants and made them subordinate to the industrialist-agrarian bloc that dominated Italy at the time. 'The Southern peasant was bound to the big landowner through the mediation of the intellectual'.²¹ Later, in the *Notebooks*, there would be many instances where he indicated how great individual intellectuals (or groups of intellectuals united around magazines, newspapers, and so on) often perform the function of political parties, as when he spoke of the party 'which is constituted by an élite of men of culture, who have the function of providing leadership of a cultural and general ideological nature for a great movement of interrelated parties';²² or when he affirmed that 'a newspaper too (or group of newspapers), a review (or group of reviews), is a "party" or "fraction of a party" or "a function of a particular party"'.²³ Gramsci even believed that the cosmopolitan nature of Italian intellectuals (the fact that they were organic intellectuals of a non-

20. Gramsci 1975, p. 1513; 1971b, pp. 6–7. It is, therefore, a vulgar mistake – one that is unfortunately very common among those who only know Gramsci indirectly – to identify 'organic intellectual' with 'revolutionary' and 'traditional intellectual' with 'conservative' or 'reactionary'. The bourgeoisie has its 'organic' intellectuals, and 'traditional' intellectuals (such as priests or professors) can be connected with the struggles of the subaltern classes.

21. Gramsci 1971a, p. 152; 1990b, p. 456.

22. Gramsci 1975, p. 1940; 1971b, pp. 149–50.

23. Ibid.

national-popular force, the Catholic Church) was one of the main causes of the lateness of Italian national unification; the intellectuals, disconnected from the people-nation, were unable to give a coherent expression to the consciousness of the bourgeois class and to make it an hegemonic element in the action of an anti-cosmopolitan social bloc. In sum, at a time when mass political parties did not yet exist, Italian intellectuals – in contrast, for instance, with the French – were unable to properly perform their function as builders of an hegemonic collective will.²⁴

However, as we have seen, if all members of a party are intellectuals, not all of them belong to the same stratum. Gramsci bases his famous theory of the internal, organisational structure of the 'Modern Prince' on this differentiation of strata. The structure must have 'three kinds of elements': 1.) an element of 'ordinary, average men', more characterised by 'discipline and loyalty' than by a 'creative spirit'; 2.) a main, cohesive element, which organises and centralises, that is, leads the party; 3.) an intermediate element that connects the other two and displays characteristics from both of them.²⁵ (Incidentally, we must point out that Gramsci's view of this difference has nothing to do with the 'theory of the élites' by Mosca or Pareto, against which he argues, claiming that it expresses an 'eternal' difference between superior and inferior beings: Gramsci not only predicts great internal mobility within the party, but also believes that, in the long run, it is the party's task to eliminate the difference itself, in the same way that communism will eliminate the difference between rulers and ruled, in the process of dissolving the state into the organisations of 'civil society'.)

To some extent, Gramsci focuses his attention on the second element, which he calls the element of 'generals'. A party cannot be comprised of them alone, certainly; but, as 'it is easier to form an army than to form generals',²⁶ a mass political party should structure itself around this element. It seems evident to me that, when writing these notes, Gramsci was thinking of the experience of his party during the years of Fascist repression: keeping an element of 'generals' possessing organic cohesion and political unity was a first condition for transforming the PCd'I into a great mass-party as soon as it was possible to regroup its members, with the end of Fascism and repression.

24. When the modern political party comes into being, it starts to be, for Gramsci, one of the main sources of the creation of organic intellectuals: 'One should stress the importance and significance which, in the modern world, political parties have in the elaboration and diffusion of conceptions of the world. ... For this reason one can say that the parties are the elaborators of new integral and totalitarian intelligentsias...' (Gramsci 1975, p. 1387; 1971b, p. 335.)

25. Gramsci 1975, p. 1733; 1971b, pp. 152–3.

26. Gramsci 1975, pp. 1733–4; 1971b, p. 153.

Considering that Gramsci (like Lenin) saw the vanguard-party of the working class as a structured and cohesive whole and not as an amorphous aggregate of corporate interests, and that only insofar as the vanguard-party is structured and cohesive is it able to organise and express a collective will, it is understandable that Gramsci granted an organic privilege to the element of 'generals', the leading core. The fact remains, however, that Gramsci was not unaware of the risk that the democratic nature of centralism may be lost in a centralised party, which would then acquire the features of a 'bureaucratic centralism'. According to Gramsci, a cohesive and centralised party is democratic when, first, there is a permanent exchange among the three elements within it; second, its function is not regressive and repressive, not that of a keeper of the existing structures, but rather progressive, aiming 'to raise the backward masses to the level of the new legality'; and third, it is not a 'simple, unthinking executor'.²⁷ However, should its democratic nature be lost, a cohesive and centralised party, once bureaucratised, would become 'a policing organism, and its name of "political party" is simply a metaphor of a mythological character'.²⁸ When Gramsci made this remark, he probably had the National Fascist Party in mind; but one should not rule out the hypothesis that he may also have been thinking of the new features the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was taking on, mainly after the beginning of Stalin's involution in 1928–9. In that case, too, thanks to the rigid identification of the Party with the state (something Gramsci criticised, as we have seen) and to the repressive character its internal life assumed, the CPSU became an 'simple executor'. Democratic centralism, conceived by Lenin and almost always applied by him, was clearly substituted by a bureaucratic-authoritarian centralism.²⁹ In other words, the CPSU took on precisely those features Gramsci harshly criticised in his notes.

If Lenin is not entirely responsible for such an involution, Gramsci – who enriched Lenin's theory of the party, even warning against the authoritarian and 'policing' risks brought by a centralised party – also cannot be considered a proponent of a Stalinist and totalitarian conception of the party and of socialist society in general.³⁰ It is true that he did not clearly formulate an

27. Gramsci 1975, p. 1692; 1971b, p. 155.

28. *Ibid.*

29. On the degenerative processes suffered by the CPSU under Stalin's dictatorship, see Procacci 1975, especially pp. 101–69, an excellent book.

30. This untenable position is the accusation in the gross polemics against Gramsci by rightist social-democrat Luciano Pellicani (see Pellicani 1976, especially p. 55 ff.) The same position appears in a more sophisticated version in Salvadori 1978, pp. 13–38 and 39–59. Nowadays it is more common to say that 'poor' Gramsci was a victim of the 'totalitarianism' of his party and of the USSR, in the hands of the 'Stalinist'

explicit theory of socialist pluralism, but perhaps it was impossible for him to do so in his time. This task would be left to Gramsci's heirs, in particular to Togliatti, whose theory of 'progressive democracy' implies a clear affirmation of the possibility – and, in many cases, of the necessity – of building socialism with a plurality of parties and social movements. However, Gramsci's own conception – in his theory of the end of the state, in his criticism of 'statolatry', in his refusal to identify the party with the state under socialism, in his defence of the strengthening of civil society *after* taking power, and so on – contains *in nuce* the bases for the dialectical overcoming of aspects of Lenin's theory (assimilated by him) of the working-class party. Furthermore, it is Gramsci's own historicism that leads him to clearly affirm the need for a permanent renewal of the theory and practice of the workers' party, in line with the renewal of the real itself, as a condition for adequately performing the function for which the party was created in the first place. In the words of Gramsci,

one may say that a party is never complete and fully-formed, in the sense that every development creates new tasks and functions, and in the sense that for certain parties the paradox is true that they are complete and fully-formed only when they no longer exist – i.e. when their existence has become historically redundant.³¹

Togliatti. A gross example of such a position can be found in Caprara 2001; a more sophisticated example, in Natoli 1990.

31. Gramsci 1975, p. 1732; 1971b, pp. 151–2.

Chapter Eight

The Current Relevance and Universality of Gramsci

Gramsci died in 1937, more than seventy years ago. It is, therefore, reasonable to ask whether he is still relevant, or, on the contrary, if he is just a 'classic' thinker, at a remove from contemporary problems. I believe there are countless reasons for us to affirm Gramsci's current relevance without denying his status as a 'classic'. It is hard to find a single field in social thought – from the humanities to philosophy and literary criticism – to which Gramsci did not greatly contribute. His thought extended to all these fields, proposing new themes, providing new answers to old themes, showing new paths for research and analysis. His contribution was decisive for Marxists, but it was also important for non-Marxist thinkers. Anyone who knows the history of liberation-theology is aware that this important trend – very significant in Latin America, in spite of the Vatican's repression – was profoundly influenced by Gramsci's reflections. There is no lack of examples.¹

1. I recommend the wonderful online Gramsci bibliography, compiled and organised by John M. Cammett, with the help of Maria Luisa Righi and Francesco Giasi, comprising some 15,000 works on our author, half of them in languages other than Italian, written by scholars from different backgrounds and theoretical and ideological leanings. This bibliography, regularly updated, can be found at <<http://www.fondazionegramsci.org>>.

Gramsci's relevance is not merely every classic thinker's 'relevance'.² Certainly, given the current neoliberal hegemony, there are no few people who wish to mummify him – even on the Left. They wish to reduce him to nothing more than a 'classic' thinker: he could be relevant, but only insofar as every classic thinker is relevant. Surely Machiavelli and Hobbes are also relevant: anyone who has read *The Prince* or *Leviathan* is aware that many insights from these books are still significant for today's world. But Gramsci's relevance is not like this: even though he is already a 'classic' in Gerratana's sense, the present relevance of the author of the *Prison Notebooks* – unlike that of Machiavelli and Hobbes – derives from the fact that he was the interpreter of a world that essentially remains the same today.

One of Gramsci's central themes was twentieth-century capitalism: its crises, its contradictions, as well as the political and social morphology created by this social formation, in regard to which the problems he discussed are still present, even if, in many cases, under new guises. The first movements to try to effectively overcome capitalist society were among his main interests. As we have seen, a large part of his work is devoted to an attempt to conceptualise the paths of the socialist revolution in the 'West', as he called it. For the very reason that capitalism and its contradictions are still present, socialism remains a central issue on the contemporary political agenda. This is why Gramsci is an interpreter of *our time*: his relevance, therefore, is not the same as that of Machiavelli or Hobbes. The apparently laudatory movement that aims at making him a mere 'classic' hides a deception: it is the movement of those who do not wish to break with Gramsci (usually for opportunistic reasons) but yet intend to disqualify him as a privileged interlocutor in the political debate of our time.

8.1. Another socialist model

One of the main reasons for Gramsci's relevance lies in his original thoughts on socialism. Of course, someone could reply that his socialism shows his backwardness, and not his relevance. Indeed, today we are faced not simply with the crisis, but with the clear failure of so-called 'actually-existing socialism'. Its collapse began in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall and very soon led to its abandonment by all Eastern-European countries, and, eventually, the USSR itself. 'Historical communism', as some have called it, somewhat inadequately – that is, the movement that began with the Bolshevik victory

2. 'The interpreter of *his own time* who remains relevant *in all times* is "classical"'. Gerratana 1997, p. 11.

in Russia in 1917; tried to become universal by creating communist parties connected with the Bolshevik model around the world; and after the Second World-War, expanded by creating a 'socialist bloc' formed by the countries that followed the Soviet model – entered a crisis that looks terminal from every possible angle.

Gramsci was certainly connected – closely and organically – to 'historical communism'. Already in 1917, he strongly defended the Bolshevik Revolution; furthermore, in 1921, he was among the founders of the Communist Party of Italy, which he led in 1926, the year he was arrested by the Fascist state. Throughout his prison-years and until his death in 1937, he maintained his politico-ideological beliefs, and deepened them. However, even though he was connected with the movement of 'historical communism' – something that allowed him to remain faithful to the liberatory values of socialism – Gramsci was never dogmatic. He always responded critically to the vicissitudes of the movement, and frequently opposed many of its orientations and tendencies. This is why, as we have seen in Chapter Five, in the *Notebooks* Gramsci undertook a keen and sharp analysis of the socialist model then-in-force in the Soviet Union. Indeed, there were no few moments at which he overtly disagreed with the line adopted by the Communist movement (and therefore by his own party).³

Nevertheless, such criticisms and disagreements should not lead anyone to claim that Gramsci was a social democrat, much less a reformist liberal, a proponent of 'market-regulation' and 'polyarchy':⁴ on the contrary, he was and remained, for all his criticisms and because of them, a revolutionary social-

3. See on this Spriano 1977; Fiori 1991 and Vacca 1994.

4. The words of Gramsci himself make utterly indefensible the following statements recently made by an Italian intellectual: '[Gramsci] begins to understand the mutation of the fundamental subjects of history and the need to abandon Lenin's class-organisation-revolution schema, rendered inadequate by a world-reality marked not by the difficulties the revolution would eventually meet, but by its *un-topicality* (if not its irrelevance). Now we are faced with the problem of the government of the market-economy, or the government of the modes of penetration and diffusion of the commodity form in ever newer areas and territories, and not, surely, with its overcoming / annulment. ... The "Modern Prince" is a functional organism for the formation and growth of a polyarchic society' (Montanari, 1997, pp. 11, 37; my emphasis). The same positions reappear in Montanari 2001, pp. 119–20: 'Thus any ideal of the present as the last (or senile) stage of capitalism is overcome in Gramsci. ... Rather, a new view of the "Revolution" (a term that proves to be inadequate, maybe even useless, at this point) as the constituting process of a new Subjectivity. Any idea of a "transition to socialism" based on a before-and-after logic is overcome'. Gramsci's alternative to the 'transition to socialism' – and I believe it would not be possible to think about any transition without 'before-and-after' – would be Americanism as a politico-economic strategy based on the idea of the growth of consumption and the widening of democracy. Unfortunately, today there are more than a few 'readings' of Gramsci – not just in Italy – that lead to such preposterous conclusions.

ist, a communist. And this, certainly, makes him relevant for the Left, at a moment when many intellectuals – even some calling themselves ‘Gramscians’ – have collapsed, in theory and in practice, in the face of the prejudices created by the neoliberal wave. His relevance, however, lies mainly in the fact that his thought does not reinforce any anachronistic temptation to return to dogmatism: as we will see, he was a *critical* communist, a *heretical* one, which allowed him to avoid most of the theoretical impasses created by ‘historical communism’. One example among many is Gramsci’s famous letter to the CPSU, already discussed in Chapter Three, in which he directly opposed the bureaucratic-authoritarian methods used to deal with political disagreements.

I have already made a broad examination, in Chapter Five, of the famous note in which Gramsci discussed ‘statolatry’, speaking openly against the statolatrous model followed by the USSR (even if it is not directly named), that is, against the theoretical and practical movement aimed at identifying the state only with ‘political society’, with the coercive instruments, with the ‘government of functionaries’, excluding the consensual-hegemonic element peculiar to ‘civil society’, to ‘self-government’. Gramsci left no doubts in this dense note: socialism, as proposed by him, cannot be identified with the ‘government of functionaries’, with the rule of bureaucracy, but rather requires the building of a strong civil society able to secure the possibility of self-government to its citizens, that is, a fully-realised democracy. Distinguishing himself from Social-Democratic Marxists who opposed the Bolshevik Revolution and the USSR (Kautsky, Plekhanov, Bernstein and so many others), Gramsci, like Rosa Luxemburg, argued that the revolution was necessary, and showed solidarity, although critically, towards its first steps. At the same time, however, he clearly dissociated himself from the paths the USSR would follow in the 1930s, when statolatry became ‘theoretical fanaticism’ and converted itself into something ‘perpetual’, thus consolidating a ‘government of functionaries’ that, as it repressed civil society and the possibilities of self-government by the citizenry, created a bureaucratic despotism that had nothing to do with the emancipatory and libertarian ideals of Marxist socialism. Thus the transition to socialism was blocked, yielding to the creation of a definitely ‘statolatrous’ society.

So, in the brief but dense note on ‘statolatry’ (and in many other parts of his work as well), Gramsci proposed a new model of socialism, a model in which the centre of the new order should reside not in strengthening the state, but rather in extending ‘civil society’. Gramsci wrote that, in ‘regulated society’ – the beautiful expression he used to designate communism – ‘the coercive element of the state withering away by degrees, as ever-more conspicuous elements of regulated society (or ethical state or civil society)

make their appearance'.⁵ As we have seen, those institutions that are proper to civil society constitute the "'private" apparatuses of hegemony', to which one adheres by consent; and it is precisely this adherence by consensus that distinguishes them from the state-apparatuses, from the 'government of functionaries' that coercively enforces its decisions from the top down. Therefore, to affirm 'ever-more conspicuous elements' in civil society means to gradually extend the area of influence of consensus, that is, of an intersubjectively-constructed public sphere, thus causing social interactions to lose their coercive nature. For Gramsci – and for Marx as well – socialism means the end of humanity's alienation from its own collective creations; once alienation is overcome, there arises the possibility for humans to autonomously make their own history and collectively control their own social relations, which, for Marx, meant the end of 'pre-history'. At the same time, Gramsci emphatically denied that 'regulated society' could be seen as a 'new liberalism', he insisted on highlighting it as 'the beginning of an era of organic liberty':⁶ in other words, of a liberty that is not merely 'negative', the liberty of private individuals as regards the state, as in the liberal conception of liberty; but one that is also 'positive', as in the democratic tradition, that is, a liberty expressed in the autonomous and collective construction of the rules and regulations that pattern the public space of social life.

With the purpose of strengthening the present relevance of Gramsci's definition of socialism, I believe it is opportune to compare his positions with those of Jürgen Habermas, a thinker who still continues to enjoy prestige among some intellectuals of the Left, as he fights the myths of postmodernism and neoliberalism in the name of the emancipatory values of the Enlightenment-tradition. To simplify Habermas's thought, I would say one can find in it two kinds of social interaction: systemic interactions, which he calls 'power' and 'money', or state-bureaucracy and market, which impose themselves on individuals by coercion and in which instrumental rationality is the norm; and communicative interaction, particular to the 'lifeworld', in which another kind of rationality prevails, based on free intersubjective consensus. Politically (and also schematically), Habermas's proposal can be summarised thus: we must struggle so that the world of life is not 'colonised' by systemic interactions, for this colonisation leads to the preponderance of reified and coercive rationality over communicative reason, which is always built intersubjectively.⁷ It is, certainly, an ambitious proposal, even if it shows some resignation, and, ultimately, conformism: even if we managed to avoid the

5. Gramsci 1975, p. 764; 1971b, p. 273.

6. Ibid.

7. See particularly Habermas 1981.

colonisation of the 'lifeworld' and its complete reification – and the means Habermas proposes for that end are, in my view, completely utopian and unrealistic – we are still asked to be resigned to the necessary presence of 'power' and 'money', which, provided they do not overreach their specific areas, and thus do not become 'colonisers', are considered by Habermas to be realities particular to modernity, realities which, he says, may be restricted, but not overcome.

Gramsci's proposal is surely more radical: he conceived of 'regulated society' as the progressive building – he spoke of '*ever-more conspicuous elements*' – of a global social order based on consensus, on self-government, in which the intersubjective public sphere ('civil society') subordinates and absorbs 'power' and 'money', that is, the coercive state and the market. Gramsci, moreover, seems more of a realist than Habermas: he knows that the victory of consensus over coercion – the construction of a public communicative space free from coercion, in Habermas's words, or a 'regulated society', in Gramsci's own – depends on a complex process of social struggles that can lead to the progressive elimination of a society divided into antagonistic classes, the main obstacle to man being able to effectively regulate in a consensual way their social interactions. The image of the 'good society' proposed by Gramsci appears, in my view, simultaneously more *radical* and more *realistic* than that proposed by Habermas.

8.2. A radical conception of democracy

As I have been suggesting, for Gramsci this new model of socialism implies a new view of democracy, one that is new not only as regards the Marxist tradition, but also – and above all – as regards the liberal tradition. On the one hand, within the context of 'historical communism', there were few occasions on which democracy was seen as something more than instrumental. Lenin, for instance, used to define it as 'the best form of bourgeois domination' from the point of view of the workers; or, when he spoke positively of 'proletarian democracy' (mass- or council-based), he insisted on contrasting it with 'bourgeois democracy' (representative, parliamentary), thus introducing a distinction that becomes highly problematic once we remember that 'representative democracy' is also largely an achievement of the workers (one need only think of the struggles of the working class for universal suffrage). On the other hand, when liberal thought finally did adopt the word democracy in a positive way (after having fought it explicitly for the most part of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries), it defined it minimalistically, that is, as mere respect for the 'rules of the game', which in their turn should be minimalistic themselves and, therefore, not put into question the substantive

foundations of the social order. Here, one need only recall the typical definition of democracy given by a liberal thinker such as Schumpeter, for whom democracy is nothing more than a method for selecting élites by means of recurring elections.⁸

Gramsci's re-evaluation of democracy, then, is connected neither with liberal thought, nor with 'historical communism'. Rather, it goes back directly to the classics of political philosophy, particularly Rousseau and Hegel. I believe I am not mistaken when I say that Gramsci restored to Marxist thought the problem of contractualism, not so much in its liberal (or Lockean) version, but precisely in its democratic and radical version, as proposed by Rousseau.⁹ Gramsci's contribution to the theory of democracy finds its most important expression in the concept of hegemony. This very concept is the main articulation-point between Gramsci's reflections and some of the most significant sets of problems in modern political philosophy, especially those contained in the concepts of general will and of contract. Obviously, I have no intention of denying Gramsci's evident connection with Marxism, but I do believe that, in constructing his theory of hegemony, he entered a dialogue not only with Marx and Lenin, or with Machiavelli, which he did explicitly, but also with other great figures of modern political philosophy, particularly Rousseau and Hegel.

This dialogue allowed Gramsci to return to a fundamental dimension of the historical-materialist view of political praxis that was not always made explicit by Marx and Engels: the understanding of politics as a privileged sphere for a possible intersubjective consensual interaction. Even if Rousseau was not directly mentioned many times in Gramsci's work, we can note in it the presence of many themes similar to those discussed by the author of *The Social Contract*. I am thinking particularly of the fact that we can find in Gramsci a concept analogous to that of 'general will', so central in the work of the Genevan author, that is, the concept of 'collective will', mentioned many times by the Italian thinker. As for Hegel, he was one of the authors most frequently mentioned by Gramsci, who takes from him not only the initiative for creating his own particular concept of 'civil society',¹⁰ but also the notion

8. Schumpeter 1979. On the (theoretical and practical) voiding of the concept of democracy in liberalism, see Losurdo 1993.

9. Below I will summarise the themes more broadly discussed in 'General Will and Democracy in Rousseau, Hegel and Gramsci', Appendix One of the present book. I apologise for any repetitions, but they are necessary so as to not lose sight of the internal logic of the argument of each chapter considered in itself.

10. See for instance, the note 'Hegel and Associationism' (Gramsci 1975, pp. 56–7) in which the Italian thinker began the reflections that soon led him to create the concept of 'civil society'.

of the 'ethical state', with which he identifies, as we have seen, his conception of 'regulated' or communist society.

Now, one of the main characteristics of Gramsci's concept of hegemony was the claim that, in an hegemonic relationship, there is always a priority of the general will over the singular or particular will, or of common or public interest over individual or private interest. This becomes clear when Gramsci says that hegemony implies a passage from the 'economic-corporatist' (or 'egoistic-passional') moment to the ethico-political (or universal) moment. I will not insist, here, on the fact that the priority of public over private, or the preponderance of the 'general will', is – going beyond defining the necessary 'rules of the game' – the essence of democracy and republicanism. Such priority, already decisive in Aristotle's definition of good government, makes a strong comeback in modern thought.

For Rousseau, for instance, such priority is not just a central issue and a task for the present, but also a decisive criterion for evaluating the legitimacy of any socio-political order. It is not by chance, then, that we should find in his work the concept of *volonté générale*, essential for the theory of democracy, but absent from the liberal tradition. In this tradition the best we can find is the concept of 'the will of all', understood, in the words of Rousseau himself, as the sum of the many private or particular interests. Again in the political philosophy of Hegel, another thinker from outside the liberal tradition, the concept of general or universal will occupies a central place, thus becoming the foundation of Hegel's defence of the priority of the universal over the singular, of public over private; however, when compared to Rousseau, Hegel distinguished himself by paying more attention to the dimension of particularity in the modern world, that is, to the mediations established between the universal will and the singular or individual wills.

Now, if Rousseau's great merit lies in affirming the priority of the general will as the foundation of all legitimate (republican or democratic) social order, the weak point in his reflection lies in the assumption that this general will is something that drastically opposes particular wills and, ultimately, represses them (men must be 'forced to be free' in order to act in accordance with the general will). For Rousseau, general will is not an empowerment or a deepening of the particular wills, but just the opposite. Allow me to use metaphorically a concept from Freud: it is as if the relationship between the 'general will', understood as 'superego', and particular will, understood as a rebellious 'unconscious', were the repression of the latter by the former. So, even though Rousseau, like any good democrat, emphatically affirmed the priority of the 'citizen' (universal) over the 'bourgeois' (egoist), in saying that, he restates man's severance between the two extremes of a dichotomy yet to

be surmounted. And, as the young Marx had already noted in *On the Jewish Question*, it is natural that whatever is 'repressed' returns, or, to put it more precisely, that the particular interests of the civil-bourgeois society end up triumphing over the universality of the citizen.

I believe that in Hegel's work there is a clear attempt to overcome these limitations in Rousseau's thought, but it gets mixed up with a dismissal of many important theoretical achievements of the Genevan thinker. In his youth, Hegel was a Rousseauist republican, but, as he evolved into maturity, he acknowledged that the modern world, unlike classical Greece – Rousseau's model, and his own paradigm – is defined by the central position of particularity, or, more precisely, by the emergence of 'civil society [*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*]'. Contrasting with the liberal thinkers, Hegel attempted to articulate this affirmation of particularity with the republican principle of the priority of public over private; but, at the same time, and disagreeing with Rousseau, he was fully aware that the pure and simple repression of particularity is incompatible with the spirit of the modern age. Hegel too, then, saw that there are contradictions between private and public, particular and universal, but thought that the way to solve these contradictions is not Freudian 'repression' but rather a *dialectical overcoming* of the particular, or the conversion of 'social-civil' wills into universal or 'state'-will.

In order to promote this dialectical overcoming, Hegel created the concept of 'ethicity' or 'ethical life', or the social sphere in which communal or universal values arise, from the insertion of individuals into objective social interactions, and not just from their subjective morals. With this, he intended to *determine*, or to ascribe a concrete dimension, to the notion of general will, which remains abstract and formal in Rousseau's work. For Hegel, then, the general will is not the *result* of singular 'virtuous' wills, as for Rousseau, but rather an ontologico-social reality that *precedes* and *determines* the singular wills themselves. This objectivity of the general will comes from the fact that the mediations that take place between the two levels of the will are also objective: it is mainly through the action of 'corporations', a collective subject he placed at the level of civil society (and that is very close to many modern unions), that Hegel tried to determine the *internal* relation between the singular will of the 'atoms' of civil society and the universal will that, according to him, would find its expression in the state.

However, if this attempt to concretely determine the general will is a step forward relative to Rousseau, there are other moments in which Hegel – from the point of view of a democratic theory – clearly made a backward step in comparison with the author of *The Social Contract*. I am not thinking so much of the clearly 'dated' positions in Hegel's political philosophy, such as his

support for a hereditary monarchy, a high chamber formed by aristocrats, or his condemnation of popular sovereignty and of political representation based on the idea of 'one man, one vote'. I am thinking mostly of the fact that, as Hegel duly applied himself to try to overcome the abstract moralism present in Rousseau's concept of the general will, he was led to abandon the contractualist (or consensual-intersubjective) dimension that lies at the heart of Rousseau's democratic proposal: as is well-known, the author of *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* was a very severe critic of all kinds of contractualism. Thus, as he attacked Rousseau's subjectivism, Hegel ended up adopting an equally one-sided objectivism. He went so far as to say that 'the objective [general] will is rationality implicit or in conception, whether it be recognised or not by individuals, whether their whims be deliberately for it or not',¹¹ thus undermining the *intersubjective* and creative dimension of human praxis, and of political praxis in particular.

In Gramsci's work, especially in his concept of hegemony, one can see an assimilation of the most valid and lucid aspects of Rousseau and Hegel's formulations; but, at the same time, it is possible to note fruitful indications of the way to overcome the limits and *aporiae* in the works of these great philosophers. On the one hand, Gramsci drew from Hegel (and naturally from Marx, who, in his turn, had already drank from the Hegelian well) the idea that wills are determined already at the level of material and economic interests; from him he also drew the affirmation that these wills objectively undergo a process of universalisation that leads to the formation of collective subjects (Hegel's 'corporations' became Gramsci's "'private" apparatuses of hegemony'). These subjects are moved by an ever-more universal will (or, in Gramsci's terms, they overcome the affirmation of merely 'economic-corporatist' interests and re-orient themselves towards an 'ethico-political' consciousness). This overcoming-movement, suggestively named 'catharsis' by Gramsci, is precisely what constitutes a relation of hegemony. On the other hand, however, it can be seen that Gramsci – to the extent that he defined as consensual the adherence to such 'apparatuses of hegemony' and included them in the 'extended' state itself, or made them the core of the future 'regulated society' – introduced a clear *contractual* dimension in the heart of the public sphere, thus going back to a notion from Rousseau abandoned by Hegel. So, Gramsci drew from Hegel the notion of 'ethnicity' (which appears in his work with the names of 'hegemony' or 'ethico-political') and at the same time drew from Rousseau the conception of politics as a contract, as an

11. Hegel 1986, § 258, p. 399.

intersubjective construction of the 'general will' (which appeared in his work as 'national-popular collective will').

Certainly, for Gramsci, the realisation of the contractual dimension will only take place fully in 'regulated [communist] society', as he called it, that is, when the division of society into antagonistic classes is definitely overcome. However, as he upheld a 'war of position' strategy in the struggle for socialism, implying a *gradual* conquest of spaces. It is possible to state that the process of extension of the consensual spheres takes place even before the full establishment of 'regulated society', and it is precisely through that process that the construction of a new hegemony becomes concrete. As we have seen, for the author of the *Notebooks*, the very construction of communism is something that happens gradually, 'as' – let us recall his words – 'ever-more conspicuous elements of regulated society (or ethical state or civil society) make their appearance'. Just as Freud said that we should apply ourselves to replacing the 'unconscious' with the 'ego', Gramsci seems to be telling us that we should replace coercion, whether it comes from the state or from the market, from 'power' or from 'money', with more and more spheres of consensus, of intersubjective control of social interactions, that is, we must build a social order that is more and more contractual and less and less coercive.

It is not by chance, I think, that the conclusions at which we arrived in the first part, when we spoke of Gramsci's conception of socialism, are analogous to those that arise now, as we summarise his theory of democracy. As he proposed a substantive concept of democracy, centred on the republican affirmation of the consensual (hegemonic!) preponderance of public over private, and as he identified this concept of democracy with his notion of 'regulated' or communist society, overcoming both the tradition of 'historical communism' and that of liberalism in its many guises, he taught us that without democracy there is no socialism, and neither is there full democracy without socialism. This understanding of this unbreakable link between socialism and democracy is certainly one of the main reasons for Gramsci's continuing relevance.

8.3. With Gramsci, beyond Gramsci

Gramsci's current relevance is a result of the profoundly universal nature of his thought. This universality is two-fold: first, there is the value Gramsci's thought has for a whole historical age; second, as a consequence, there is the fact that Gramsci's ideas are discussed and used today not only in Italy and throughout Europe, but across the whole world.

However, it should be noted that the novelty and universality of Gramsci's formulations was not acknowledged immediately, nor in linear fashion. Since,

as anyone could have foreseen, the first 'Gramscians' were his countrymen, there was a tendency – which included even those countrymen – to see our author as a mere forerunner of an 'Italian road to socialism'. In a time when Marxism-Leninism – a clever pseudonym for 'Stalinism' – only allowed (when it did) its heresies to express themselves as 'national communisms', the inclination to confine Gramsci within the problematics of his own country is not surprising. On the other hand, even those who, in practice, operated within the framework of Gramsci's theoretical renewal – and such was the case of Togliatti himself, either for 'tactical' reasons or because his mental habits were too ingrained – tended to undermine the novelty and the universality of the author of the *Notebooks*, presenting him as a perfect Leninist. The moment of *conservation* was the only one to be stressed in Gramsci's dialectical relationship with Lenin, leaving aside *overcoming* and *elevation to a higher level*. It was necessary to wait for the process of extinction of the old Stalinist dogmas inherited from the Third International to be advanced enough for Gramsci to be celebrated not as 'Italy's greatest Leninist', but as the most important Marxist thinker of the twentieth century. (To acknowledge this evidently does not justify the opposite one-sided position, particular to some interpreters, that denies the moment of continuity/conservation between Gramsci and Lenin.)

However, to recognise Gramsci's universality does not in any way mean imagining that ready answers for all the theoretical and practical challenges that reality today poses for Marxists can be found in his work. I have tried to show in Chapter Six how Gramsci's strategy of the 'war of position' for achieving hegemony lacked greater concretisation. Togliatti was the very first to initiate this process of concretisation, when he created his concept of 'progressive democracy' as a means for the transition to socialism.¹²

The process, however, did not end with Togliatti: one need only think of Pietro Ingrao's reflection on the 'mass-democracy', on the need to articulate hegemony and pluralism in the struggle for socialism and in the construction of the socialist society.¹³ These cases, besides, are not just about 'applying' Gramsci's ideas to concrete national realities, but also to develop on the theoretico-political level the original positions of the author of the *Notebooks*, conserving and overcoming them.

12. For an analysis of the relationship between Gramsci and Togliatti, see, among others, Vacca 1974 and Auciello 1974, old but still-valid books. Most of the more recent works on the topic, inspired by so-called 'revisionism', turn Togliatti into an intransigent Stalinist and a persecutor of Gramsci, and thus have no theoretical or historiographical value. There are, though, two important exceptions: Pistillo 1996 and Vacca 1999.

13. Ingrao's positions are presented mostly in Ingrao 1978 and 1982.

Certainly, it is impossible to understand Ingrao's notion of 'mass-democracy' without relating it to Gramsci's conceptions of 'civil society' and 'hegemony', but it would also be wrong to not realise that the idea of hegemony within pluralism (which implies, among other things, the articulation of direct and representative democracy) is in Gramsci's work merely a seed, not fully developed, and perhaps unable to be developed at that time.¹⁴ Therefore, Gramsci's universality does not exempt those Marxists inspired by him from two basic tasks: first, to concretise his general theoretical formulations, 'applying' them to their own historical time and their own national reality; and second, to continue the *theoretical* development of the concepts of state and socialist revolution, enriching Gramsci's formulations with new determinations from the evolution of reality after his death.

I have tried to indicate – through brief mentions of some formulations by Palmiro Togliatti and Pietro Ingrao – how some Italian Communists attempted to move in both those directions. However, in order to accurately stress Gramsci's universality, it is important to remember that the Italians were not the only ones to receive Gramsci's heritage by means of a dialectical process of 'conservation/renewal'. One need only mention the work of Nicos Poulantzas, the (tragically and prematurely interrupted) expression of one of the most lucid Marxist political reflections of our times. After a period in which he was deeply influenced by Althusser's structuralist formalism, Poulantzas, in his last works, went back to his Gramscian origins. This allowed him to offer, as a synthesis of his brilliant analyses of the capitalist state, an exemplary definition of the state-phenomenon:

The state is the material condensation of a relation of forces between classes and fractions of classes, in the way that it is expressed, always specifically, within the state itself.¹⁵

This formulation by Poulantzas is clearly inspired by Gramsci, who says,

The life of the State is conceived of as a continuous process of formation and superseding of unstable equilibria (on the juridical plane) between the interests of the fundamental group and those of the subordinate groups – equilibria in which the interests of the dominant group prevail, but only

14. 'Perhaps' refers to the fact that, even if not in fully systematic fashion, the idea of an articulation between direct democracy and representative democracy, between councils and parliaments, already appears in the main authors of Austro-Marxism as early as the 1920s. See particularly Adler 1970.

15. Poulantzas 1978, p. 147. See also his interviews in Poulantzas 1980, pp. 109–83, a posthumous collection.

up to a certain point, i.e. stopping short of narrowly corporate economic interest.¹⁶

However, when he 'applies' his theory of the state to the strategy for the transition to socialism, Poulantzas proves that he had *dialectically overcome* Gramsci: whereas the latter conceived the struggle for hegemony and for the conquest of positions as something that took place within civil society (within the 'private apparatuses of hegemony'), Poulantzas goes beyond and speaks of an analogous battle to be fought within the state-apparatuses themselves, in the narrow sense ('political society', in Gramsci's phrase). Poulantzas says,

The long process of taking power within a democratic path to socialism essentially consists in developing, strengthening, coordinating and directing the dispersed resistance centres of the masses, within state-networks, creating and developing others, so that these centres may become – in the strategic area of the state – the actual centres of real power. ... This is not, therefore, a mere choice between frontal war of movement and war of position, as the latter, from Gramsci's point of view, is always a siege of the fortress state'.¹⁷

This process, Poulantzas adds,

really refers to a *succession of actual ruptures*, the climax of which – and a climax will forcibly ensue – consists in the inversion of the relation of forces in favour of the popular masses within the strategic area of the state.¹⁸

Surely we can see, here, that Gramsci's formulation was 'elevated to a higher level'. Poulantzas, however, would not have been able to develop his socialist-democratic strategy without Gramsci's 'extended' concept of the state, nor without his theory of 'war of position'.

The foremost expression of Gramsci's universality, therefore, lies in the fact that his theoretical problematics work as a *necessary* starting point for what I hold to be among the most meaningful recent attempts to renew Marxist political theory. On the other hand, his universality also has a geographical dimension: it is more and more evident that the processes of 'Westernisation' (of 'extension' of the state thanks to the creation of civil society and its

16. Gramsci 1975, p. 1584; 1971b, p. 182. Not without reason, this formulation of Gramsci's comes under the heading 'Analysis of Situations. Relations of Force'.

17. Poulantzas 1978, pp. 296–7. I do not think Gramsci conceived the war of position as a mere 'siege of the fortress-state'. But this probable mistake in Poulantzas's reading does not deny the novelty in his formulation.

18. Poulantzas 1978, p. 342.

ever-greater complexity) tend to generalise themselves towards different geographical areas, both in the 'North' and the 'South' of the world, making Gramsci's universality something *nationally concrete* for socialists in a growing number of countries.¹⁹

19. In two of the appendices of the present work, 'The Neoliberal Age' and 'Gramsci in Brazil', I will attempt to show Gramsci's influence in South-American social thought, particularly in Brazil.

Appendices

Appendix One

General Will and Democracy in Rousseau, Hegel and Gramsci*

This essay discusses Gramsci's relationship with the concept of democracy. Gramsci's contribution to the theory of democracy finds its utmost expression in the concept of hegemony, which is indeed a central concept for his whole theoretical system; this much has been noted frequently. Less noted, however, has been the connection between the author of the *Prison Notebooks* and two of the most significant concepts of modern political philosophy, those of a 'general will' and of a 'social contract'. In this essay, therefore, I do not approach the matter in the usual manner, that is, by discussing the specifically Marxist matrix of the concept of hegemony. (This does not mean, obviously, that I disagree with the notion that Gramsci is a Marxist: as we have seen, it is not possible to understand his thought appropriately if his link with the organic tradition initiated by Marx is denied.) I undertake, rather, the different task of showing that, in his inquiry into democracy and the construction of the theory of hegemony, Gramsci engaged in dialogue not only with Marx and Lenin, or Machiavelli – which he undoubtedly did do – but also, if at times implicitly, with other great figures of modern political philosophy, Rousseau and Hegel in

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particular. In my opinion, Gramsci set out to explore a fundamental dimension of the historical-materialist conception of political praxis that Marx and Engels had not always made clear: the character of political praxis as a privileged sphere of intersubjective and consensual interaction. As we know, this dimension has attracted the attention of others, such as Hannah Arendt and Jürgen Habermas, who try to address it by means of their respective concepts of 'action' and 'communicative action'.¹ In the work of Gramsci, however, this dimension, precisely because it was formulated according to a historical-materialist approach, received a more concrete (or less utopian) treatment than in the work of Arendt and Habermas. For a historical-materialist analysis of this dimension, Gramsci's dialogue with Hegel and Rousseau is decisive.

1.1. The priority of the public

A basic thrust of Gramsci's concept of hegemony is captured by the idea that, in a hegemonic relation, there is always a profession of the priority of a general will over particular wills, of public over private interest. As we know, Gramsci defined politics as 'catharsis', or 'the passage from a merely economic (or egoistic-passional) moment to an ethical-political moment',² a passage, that is, to the sphere where universal (or universalising) interest is given a clear priority over merely singular or corporatist interest, where, that is, relations of hegemony *effectively* take place.

In the history of political philosophy, this priority has functioned as a criterion for the analysis of the political sphere for over two thousand years. Aristotle, for instance, distinguished between good and bad forms of government based on whether the ruler was guided by the public interest, the interest of the collectivity, or by his private interests. In the modern world, the question reappears with, among others, Montesquieu, who considers the priority of the public over the private ('virtue') the 'principle of government' upon which the republican system rests – even if for him, as is known, this system belonged to the past and could not possibly exist in the modern world, whose appropriate form of government is instead a constitutional, 'moderate', monarchy. But it is with Jean-Jacques Rousseau that the question becomes a focal point of contemporary interest and yields the ultimate criterion for the legitimacy of any socio-political order. One can note in Rousseau's work the presence of a fundamental concept, precisely that of a 'general will' (*volonté générale*), which is not to be found in the liberal tradition before or after him: only a

1. Arendt 1958; Habermas 1981.

2. Gramsci 1975, p. 1244; 1971b, pp. 366–7.

concept of the 'will of all' can be found in the liberal tradition. Rousseau defined general will as something distinct from this 'will of all', the former expressing the public interest and the latter a mere sum of different private interests.³ I believe that the concept of general will – meaning, again, precedence of the public over the private – also occupied a central position in the political philosophy of Hegel, whose thinking is also alien to the liberal tradition.

Although Rousseau was seldom mentioned in the *Notebooks*, to me it does not seem arbitrary to propose a relationship between him and Gramsci. In Gramsci's work we can notice the presence of, in addition to other themes also present in Rousseau, something akin to the concept of a 'general will', precisely the concept of 'collective will'. Even less arbitrary is it to propose a link between Gramsci and Hegel, whose name was frequently mentioned in the *Notebooks*: we can see clear, sometimes unambiguous, evidence of Hegel's influence in the concepts of a 'civil society' and of an 'ethical state', frequently used by Gramsci. One concrete example, among others, is the note entitled 'Hegel and Associationism', in which Gramsci expressed, probably for the first time, although still in a rudimentary way and without yet using the term, his specific concept of 'civil society'.⁴ Certainly, his concept is different from Hegel's (to an even greater degree than he himself seems to believe in this note); and both their concepts are, in turn, different from the one frequently used by Marx. In Hegel, civil society includes what Marx calls 'structure', that is, economic relations, but, in contrast to Marx, it also includes other spheres, among which are those to which Gramsci refers with the term 'associationism'. This is particularly the case with institutions which, although Hegel, using terminology of certain *ancien-régime* derivation, calls them 'corporations', depict social structures that are in fact closer to modern trade-unions than to medieval institutions. It is precisely this 'associationist' moment of Hegelian thought that Gramsci recaptured in his definition of 'civil society'. Gramsci, in his turn, places realms which in Hegel are part of *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* in different spheres of social being: the 'system of needs' in what he calls 'economic society', and the 'administration of justice' and the 'police' in 'political society' (or the state *strictu sensu*). Gramsci's selective return to Hegel thus focused substantially on the 'private apparatuses of hegemony' and constituted them as the fundamental bases of his specific notion of 'civil society'.

3. Rousseau 1964b, p. 371.

4. Gramsci 1975, pp. 56–7.

1.2. Rousseau and the general will

Starting from a non-liberal position, Rousseau was the first modern thinker to insist on the idea that society, whatever its form of government, can only be legitimate when grounded on a general will, the public interest, or popular sovereignty (three practically-synonymous terms for him). The Genevan thinker is a harsh critic of liberalism. In the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, Jean-Jacques caustically attacked society based on private property, which he called '*société civile*', and in which traces of the emerging mercantile-bourgeois order are clearly recognisable. Rousseau tried to demonstrate that the roots of inequality are the division of labour, the ensuing régime of private property, and the conflicts of interest and egoism that the market inevitably produces.⁵ In the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau severely denounced the mythology of liberal political economy, particularly Adam Smith's rendition of it, which professes that the pursuit of private interest leads, through the spontaneous action of the market, to a collective welfare. For Rousseau, by contrast, the 'invisible hand' in the world of the market leads not to collective welfare, but to the unrestrained Hobbesian war of all against all, to alienation, and to inequality. However, not satisfied with this critique of the economic mythology of liberalism, Rousseau went on to criticise the political illusions of liberal contract-theory. Also in the *Second Discourse*, describing the vicissitudes of the process of socialisation, Rousseau showed that at a certain moment in their evolution toward civilisation humans make a contract. This contract, like that described by John Locke in the *Second Treatise of Government*, has the ultimate purpose of guaranteeing private property. However, in contrast to the liberal English philosopher, who upheld this kind of contract, Rousseau mercilessly stressed its lack of legitimacy: in reality, precisely because it only intends to protect interests that are merely private, the liberal contract brings profit exclusively to owners of property, strengthens social inequality, and generates the political oppression of the 'poor' by the 'rich'. Here, although he did not have a precise concept of social class (and hence wrote of 'rich' and 'poor'), Rousseau clearly anticipated Marx in revealing the class-nature of the state, including the state founded by (and based on) a liberal kind of contract. In this sense, the *Second Discourse* offers a devastating critique not only of bourgeois political economy, but also of the whole liberal tradition of contract-theory that begins with Locke.

It is obvious, however, that while he criticised liberal contractualism, Rousseau did not abandon contract-theory. In fact, a few years after the *Discourses* he wrote his masterpiece on the *Social Contract*, dedicated to the study of a

5. Rousseau 1964a, pp. 109–237.

legitimate pact. It seems to me that this new text establishes the '*pars construens*' of Rousseau's system that had found in the two *Discourses* its '*pars destruens*': after severely criticising the 'civil society' of his time in these *Discourses*, highlighting its cruel contradictions and the stalemates that inevitably drive it to growing inequality and finally to despotism, Rousseau proposed another kind of society in the *Contract*, a legitimate society, suitable to the potentialities of social man – and it must be emphasised that, unlike the liberals, Rousseau spoke of a legitimate society, not only of a legitimate government. This legitimate order is also based on a contract, but now of a kind entirely different from the one proposed by Locke and other liberals, different from the one that Rousseau, in the *Second Discourse*, had already described as responsible for a clearly iniquitous outcome. The pact of the *Social Contract* does not aim to secure private property, under the guise of protecting so-called 'natural rights'. Rousseau's legitimate social contract calls for the creation of a general will, based on the collective interest and representing the subjective postulate of popular sovereignty. This contract establishes a 'people' as such, which thus emerges as a collective subject; and what moves this subject is precisely the general will, not the sum of individual or private interests, but the common interest of the collectivity. What distinguishes Rousseau's democratic standpoint is precisely this: the assertion that society can only be legitimate if founded on popular sovereignty, on the construction of a collective subject that, based on general will, acts according to public interest – which, as we will see, to him means that it acts in opposition to private interests.

I would, therefore, like to retain from Rousseau's work the idea that democracy is organically linked with the concept of contract. Now, who says contract also says consensus, expressing the idea that individuals can organise themselves into collective subjects based on consensus, free will. And here, already, it is possible to point out a first approximation between Rousseau's legitimate contract and Gramsci's concept of hegemony: as we know, Gramsci conceived hegemony as a relation built on consensus, and not coercion. But it is also fundamentally important to retain from Rousseau's work the idea that there are different types of contract: the contract on which democracy is based is not – using Gramsci's expression – one supported by, and in turn legitimating, 'economic-corporatist' or 'egoistic-passional' interests, but rather one which creates a space for a public sphere centered on the 'ethico-political,' universality, collective interest. Moreover, the contract proposed by Rousseau, based on general will and popular sovereignty, ultimately entails the idea of self-government; Gramsci's position is no different when, defining communism as a 'regulated society', he says that in such a society the coercive apparatus of the state will be gradually assimilated by the consensual (or contractual) mechanisms of civil society. Both thinkers considered capitalism

inconsistent with the radical democratisation of society: while Rousseau stated that, in the legitimate order he proposes, nobody can be so poor as to be forced to sell himself, namely, to become a wage-worker,⁶ Gramsci was convinced that the 'regulated society' can only emerge after the eradication of social classes. But, in spite of his extraordinary perception and openness to the future, Rousseau's thought is not without limitations and ambiguities, which result primarily from his specific historical conditions. First of these limitations – which had, in fact, been pointed out by Marx in *The Jewish Question*, in which there is an allusive polemic with Rousseau and his Jacobin disciples⁷ – is the fact that the author of the *Social Contract* presupposes the general will to be radically opposed to individual wills, which it must ultimately repress (men must be 'forced to be free', Rousseau wrote, that is, to act according to the general will). In other words, for Rousseau, the general will is not a strengthening or a deepening of individual wills, but its opposite, in such a way that the individuals must put aside (or repress) their individual wills if they want to act effectively in agreement with the general will. Making a metaphorical use of a well-known Freudian concept, I would say that, in Rousseau's work, it is as if the relation between general will, understood as a 'superego', and individual will, understood as a rebel-'unconscious', is one of a repression of the latter by the former.

But, as Freud also said, the 'repressed' returns and, when it does, it emerges by means of a neurosis, a fragmentation of personality. Speaking less metaphorically, we could say, now with terms already familiar to the young Marx, that Rousseau's system – although it decidedly places the *citoyen* above the *bourgeois* – reaffirms man's severance between these two roles, poles of an insurmountable dichotomy. The dichotomy is reproduced in Rousseau because, while he condemned capitalism and the inequality of property, he does not transcend the horizon of private property. Rousseau's point of view in attacking capitalism is not the same as that of the modern working class, the proletariat, but rather that of the independent peasants and artisans who, in Rousseau's time, were seeing their way of life gradually being destroyed by the impetuous development of the capitalistic mode of production. The socio-economic base of the democratic order proposed by Rousseau does not include the socialisation of property, but rather its equal division (although it is true that, for him, this is only a necessary but insufficient condition for the emergence of a general will): no-one should own property in excess or, at the other extreme, be deprived of it. But the fact remains that the legitimate

6. Rousseau 1964b, pp. 391–2.

7. Marx 1974, pp. 45–88.

society proposed by Rousseau still has its socio-economic base in individual property, hence in a mercantile economy – that which, with Marx, we could call a ‘simple mercantile economy’, which is still precapitalist.

The utopian features of this romantic anticapitalistic moment present in Rousseau do not undermine the greatness or modernity of his democratic proposal, but they do introduce into his system the limitations and ambiguities we have mentioned:⁸ a mercantile society such as he proposed, even if not capitalist, leads to the maintenance and ultimately the strengthening of private interest; in other words, it forces members of the society, in the reproduction of their material life, to act according to interests contrary to those they have the duty to have as citizens in the public sphere – and it should not be forgotten that, after a certain expansion of market-processes, it is impossible to prevent the transformation of a simple mercantile mode of production into a capitalist mode. Even as regards the *citoyen* ‘superego’ in Rousseau’s legitimate order, who has the mission of repressing the ‘unconscious’ bourgeois moment of private interest, the fact is that this ‘repressed’ sooner or later tends to return, thus blocking the effective manifestation of the general will or, to return to our Freudian metaphor, of the collective ‘ego’ of citizenship. Therefore, Rousseau’s democratic proposition is open to the same criticism that can be made of the Kantian ethics of ‘categorical imperatives’, which radically counterposes reason (universal) and interest (individual).⁹ It is precisely in this sense that Marx, in *The Jewish Question*, criticises the utopianism of the Jacobins, Rousseau’s faithful disciples, and demonstrates that attempting to place the *citoyen* above the *bourgeois*, while at the same time preserving the conditions that reproduce the latter in real life, leads to a deadlock, and ultimately to the triumph of bourgeois society and the resulting collapse of citizenship: a path that, after all, was clearly demonstrated in the course of the French Revolution, after the triumph of the Thermidorian reaction over the Jacobins.

Moreover, this radical contrast between individual and general will led Rousseau to pay insufficient attention, to put it mildly, to the conditions of pluralism in modern society. Rousseau, as we know, categorically criticised the presence of private associations within legitimate society: he supposed that such associations, while creating their own ‘general’ will (or, to be

8. The concept of ‘romantic anti-capitalism’ is used here in the sense given to it by Lukács (particularly 1981).

9. It does not seem accidental, therefore, that Kant was an admirer of Rousseau, even if it was a Rousseau deprived of his specifically democratic dimension. Certainly, there is a significant difference between Rousseau and Kant: the author of *Social Contract* insists that the general will is not opposed to interest in itself, but only to individual interest, and is instead rooted in the public interest.

precise, their corporatist group-wills), obstruct the possibility of the emergence of an effective, 'ethico-political' general will. Forced to accept that such associations may be inevitable, Rousseau warned that they should, at least, exist in great numbers. This, however, represents no solution, since he did not discuss the means by which this multiplicity of group wills could be articulated into a general will, which is reason enough to suppose that here, too, would arise the same 'Freudian' problems previously indicated in the relation between individual and general will rise. And so the implication remains, throughout the *Contract*, that pluralism and diversity also are ultimately inconsistent with the general will. Despite these limitations, however, it is important to retain Rousseau's fundamental insight that democracy is based on a contract, or consensus, whose premise and whose results are a general or collective will, or, in other words, the precedence of the public over the private.

1.3. Hegel and the determinations of will

One proposal to overcome the limitations in Rousseau's thought (even if, as we shall see, this was accompanied by the loss of some of his major theoretical achievements) appears in Hegel's work. In his youth, the German philosopher shared some of Rousseau's approach: in his writings of the Bern period, for instance, Hegel proposed the restoration of a democratic community, akin to that of the Greek model, as a remedy for the dissensions and alienations he observed in the modern world; as we know, this was also the paradigm adopted by Rousseau. However, already in the writings of the Frankfurt (though mostly in the Jena) period, Hegel realised that the modern differed from the world of classical Greece, being marked by a centrality of the particular, or, more precisely, by the emergence of a social sphere unknown in classical times. Under the influence of the renowned work of Adam Ferguson, Hegel called this new sphere 'civil society [*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*]', for him the actual reign of particularity. Hegel observed that, while the eruption of particularity brought about the destruction of the 'beautiful communal ethical life' of the Greek world, as foreseen and lamented by Plato, the ethical life of modern times carried the full expression of this particularity at its very moment of inception and thus could not be dissociated from it. In fact, this greater range of action of particularity is one of the conditions of that subjective universal freedom that, for Hegel, represents the attributes of the modern, 'Christian-Germanic', era.

But, unlike liberal thinkers, Hegel does not treat the positive role of particularity in the modern era as an end in itself. On the contrary, in his political

philosophy he attempts to reconcile the freedom of the particular with a priority of the public over the private, or, in other words, to reconcile (synthesise dialectically) the modern expansion of particularity with the communitarian ideal of the Greek *polis*. In opposition to Rousseau, and in the vein of liberalism, Hegel realised that the repression of particularity had become unsuited to modernity's *Zeitgeist*;¹⁰ the maintenance of a sphere of individual freedom, be it at the objective level of abstract right or at the subjective level of morality, or else in the realm of 'civil society', appears to him a necessary condition of the full development of the potentialities of modernity. Nevertheless, for Hegel, although this particularity is a necessary condition, it is not alone sufficient: going beyond liberalism – and as such converging objectively with Rousseau – he proposed the creation of universalising instances that dialectically overcome (eliminate at one level, but preserve at a higher level) the sphere of particularity, mainly the instance of 'civil society'.¹¹ While, in contrast to liberalism, Hegel speaks of the structural contradictions of 'civil society', these contradictions can, if not be resolved, at least be attenuated through the subordination of civil society to the state. For Hegel, this subordination does not constitute a type of Freudian repression, but a transcendence [*Aufhebung*] of individual will ('civil society') into universal will (the 'state'). To give this transcendence a conceptual expression and, at the same time, to legitimate the priority of the public (universal) over the private (particular), Hegel produces a concept fundamental to the development of modern political philosophy, the concept of *Sittlichkeit*, which can be translated as 'ethical life'.¹² Because they live in community, human-beings produce values and rules of behaviour that regulate and organise their interactions, thus imparting a concrete meaning to individual choices which, were they to remain in the sphere of morality, would only have formal status. Revealing itself only and still in a natural sense in the family, and in an unconscious and merely embryonic sense in civil society, ethical life finds in the state – understood not only as one particular sphere among others, or as 'government', but as the organic totality

10. Hegel, placing himself on the horizon of the bourgeoisie and seeing in the post-Napoleonic capitalist society the 'end of history' had an exaggerated tendency to identify the sphere of particularity and of the expansion of individuality with the reign of capitalistic markets. At this point, Hegel, an attentive reader of Adam Smith (who provided the basis for his own specific understanding of 'civil society'), certainly did surrender to liberal ideology, something which, as we have seen, did not occur with Rousseau.

11. It should be mentioned that, for Hegel, 'civil society', the sphere of developed particularity, is not yet the State, namely, the true dimension of universality. Therefore he reproaches 'many modern constitutional lawyers' (the liberals) for fostering confusion (Hegel 1986, § 164, p. 315 ff.).

12. Hegel 1986, p. 292 ff.

of the plural spheres of social life, as the concrete manifestation of the 'objective Spirit' – its truly adequate figure.

With the concept of ethical life, Hegel wanted to establish (give concrete dimension to) the notion of general will that in Rousseau had remained abstract and formal, precisely insofar as it excluded, as antinomic, the moment of particular will and individual interest. Indeed, because it finds its presupposition exclusively in a subjective determination to put the public interest above the private – a condition that the *Social Contract*, following Montesquieu, calls 'virtue' – Rousseau's general will is subject to the same criticism that Hegel addresses to the abstract formalism of Kantian ethics. With the concept of ethical life and with the assertion that values and rules arise objectively from interactive social life, Hegel tried to demonstrate that the general (universal) will is not the result of the action of single 'virtuous' wills but, on the contrary, the reality that precedes and defines individual wills. Therefore, for Hegel, general will is not the outcome of a contract among individual wills, but an objective socio-ontological reality, a product of the development of 'Spirit', that is, of history. This is why, in *The Philosophy of Right*, Hegel did not hesitate to write:

Confronted with the claims for the individual will, we must remember the fundamental conception that the objective will is rationality implicit or in conception, whether it be recognized or not by individuals, whether their whims be deliberately for it or not.¹³

What Hegel means is that universal will is concretely, objectively, determined and its determinations are largely settled at the level of 'civil society'. For Hegel, civil society is the 'atomistic system': although, in it, each individual is in search of his own private interest, the ensuing division of labour creates a 'system' in which the satisfaction of each individual's needs depends on the work of others. In addition, since production is divided into branches, each branch develops its own particular interests, which is what leads to the establishment of corporations that try to defend the common interest of their members. This corporatist system is an important moment of Hegelian 'civil society', so important, in fact, that he argued that it is through the corporation – a collective subject – that ethical life first penetrates into civil society. Therefore, the corporation is one of the main mediations through which Hegel attempts to determine the internal relation between the singular wills of the 'atoms' of civil society and the universal will whose realisation is the state; in other words, the particular (but already common) will personified

13. Hegel 1986, § 257, p. 405.

by a corporation appears as a conscious mediation between the two other levels of will (singular and universal). Thus, far from being an obstacle to the emergence of a general will, as they had been in Rousseau, the 'private associations' – corporations – are, for Hegel, a fundamental moment of the process of universalisation of will. For the author of *The Philosophy of Right*, therefore, there is not an antinomic relation between singular and universal will, in which the second represses the first; there is, on the contrary, a dialectical relation in which the singular will of individuals is, through the particular will of the corporations, transcended [*aufheben*] – eliminated at one level but preserved, nonetheless as it is lifted to a higher level – into the general will of the collectivity of the state. In becoming a member of a corporation, the individual becomes a citizen of the state, without having to abdicate his individual interest but nonetheless acknowledging that the satisfaction of his individual interests requires their articulation with the particular interests (of the corporation) and the universal interest (of the state). In Hegel, in distinction to Rousseau, there is not a movement toward a repression of singular will by the universal (general) will, but a dialectical potentiation, an immanent mediation within the field of will. Moreover, by conceiving a universal will which preserves (by transcending) singular and particular wills, Hegel can imagine a state that, though oriented by a totality, is anything but totalitarian: in so far as it is a concrete totality – that is, differentiated – the Hegelian state is necessarily a pluralistic state.¹⁴ Extending this further, but hopefully still remaining true to the spirit of Hegelian thought, we could suggest that this is a state where hegemony (the preponderance of universality or of the public) is organically linked with pluralism (with the preservation and development of particularities and differences).

This attempt by the German philosopher to determine *concretely* the universal will – the formation of corporations is one example – is a step beyond Rousseau and a decisive contribution to the modern theory of democracy and of the democratic state.¹⁵ There are, nonetheless, significant points at which Hegel falls short of Rousseau regarding the question of democracy. I do not

14. A competent critique of the positions that impute to Hegel a totalitarian conception of the state can be found in Marcuse (1954). But see also, among others, Weil 1950; Avineri 1972; Losurdo 1997a.

15. And even to a socialistic theory of democracy and the state. We should remember, for example, the words of the Gramscian Pietro Ingrao: 'Today we speak of hegemony and pluralism. More precisely: hegemony of the working class within pluralism. The battle for a working-class hegemony evolves within pluralism. This is a formula that does not restrict itself to indicating a direction for the working class based on consensus: it is a formula that already alludes to a precise state and political form of consensus' (Ingrao 1977, p. 240).

intend to linger on the several points on which Hegel deviates explicitly from a democratic position (denial of popular sovereignty, pseudo-dialectical deduction of the necessity of a hereditary monarchy, a bicameral legislative chamber composed of the nobles and the corporations, and so on). It is more important for us to concentrate on one major question: in his important effort to overcome the level of abstraction and moralism present in Rousseau's concept of general will and to give a concrete and objective density to universal will, Hegel was led to discard the contractualist dimension that lies at the centre of Rousseau's democratic proposal. It is as if, in order to overcome the subjectivism that arises in the thought of Rousseau, Hegel fell into an equally unilateral objectivism, omitting the inter-subjective dimension of human praxis.

Hegel is well-known as a harsh critic of contract-theories of the state; for him, it is a conspicuous mistake to use an instrument of private law, something subjective like a contract, to explain a public reality, objective and universal, such as the state.¹⁶ Such a method would imply that individuals could cancel the contract and abolish the state, which seems absurd to Hegel – all the more absurd when we remember that for him individuals exist only in and through the state. For Hegel, whose reference at this point is the Greek *polis* and not modern liberalism, the state, as a totality, precedes and is superior to the individuals who compose it. Moreover, the dismissal of the contract as an explanation of the genesis of the state leads the German philosopher to categorically oppose to the idea of popular sovereignty and universal suffrage: although the citizens of a state can deliberate, they should do so only with regard to particular questions directly related to them, and not about the general interest: it is for this reason that he proposes that the citizens be politically represented not by one legislative assembly, elected by universal and equal suffrage (even though the principle had already been affirmed by the French Revolution), but by two chambers, formed by nobles and corporations.¹⁷

Now, it seems to me that Hegel would have been right if he had stated only that it is a mistake to consider society as a whole the *product* of a contract

16. 'It is equally far from the truth to ground the nature of the State on the contractual relation, whether the state is supposed to be a contract of all with all, or of all with the monarch and the government.... The intrusion of this contractual relation, and relationships concerning private property generally, into the relations between the individual and the State has been productive of the greatest confusion in both constitutional law and public life' (Hegel 1986, § 75, p. 157).

17. But one should not forget that Hegel defended the principle of representation – even if in anachronistic ways – in an absolutist Prussia that emphatically denied it. See Bedeschi 1997, p. 192.

among individuals. Although it results from the multiple teleological positions of its members, society as a whole is not the product of a conscious collective action: this, Hegel knew all too well, even if he ascribed the role(s) of subject and *telos* of the global historical process to a mythical 'Spirit' that 'cunningly' used the actions of individuals to serve its own ends.¹⁸ But this does not mean that no sphere of social life could be regulated through consensus, through the conscious interaction of men. Since he equates state and society – the state is not a moment of social life, but the organic totality that integrates all its moments – Hegel denies the possibility that the specific sphere of politics could be contractually (or consensually) based. With him, therefore, the otherwise justifiable rejection of a unilateral individualist subjectivism turns into an equally unilateral objectivism, in which freedom is nothing but 'the conscience of necessity', something ultimately *post festum*. And this entails the denial of the sphere of the inter-subjective in which subjects, even if within the limits imposed by their natural and social objective determinations, could consensually 'invent' the contents of their ethical life.

Certainly, Hegel's critical stance towards contract-theory is the product of his categorical assertion of the priority of the public over the private, and this is what allows us to locate him, in a certain sense, in the democratic but not liberal stream of modern political philosophy. But, at the same time, this critical stance led him to abandon the idea, so splendidly expressed by Rousseau, that, as the foundation of a democratic political order, the public space must be the product of a consensus emerging from the free and equal participation of all citizens. For Hegel, freedom is ultimately limited to a recognition and acceptance of necessity: as if a singular will became effectively (not arbitrarily) free only when it recognised and accepted a universal will in the creation of which it did not itself take part, at least not consciously.¹⁹ Thus, notwithstanding all of its undeniable merits, Hegel's political philosophy ultimately appears to entail an invitation to resignation and conformism.

18. Hegel 1952, p. 153 ff.

19. The young Marx had already aptly criticised this 'fatalistic' aspect of Hegel's political philosophy: 'Is it the fact, then, that in the State – which, according to Hegel, is the highest existence of freedom, the existence of self-conscious reason – not law, the existence of freedom, but rather blind natural necessity governs? ... Hegel wants always to present the State as the actualization of free mind; however, *re vera* he resolves all difficult conflicts through a natural necessity which is the antithesis of freedom. Thus, the transition of particular interest into universal interest is not a conscious law of the State, but is mediated through chance and ratified contrary to consciousness' (Marx 1970, pp. 56–7).

1.4. Gramsci and hegemony as contract

In the preceding schematic outline of the question of general will in Rousseau and Hegel, I have been suggesting that Gramsci, on the one hand, absorbed the more accurate and rational parts of the positions of these two classic figures of modern political philosophy and, on the other hand, developed fertile leads on ways to overcome the limits and *aporiae* present in their work. These leads are contained mostly in the concept of hegemony. Before discussing this concept, however, it might be useful to remember that the question of 'will' occupies a central place in Gramsci's political-philosophical reflections as well as those of Rousseau and Hegel, present in the evolution of his thinking from his youth to the *Prison Notebooks*. Early in his intellectual itinerary, Gramsci's concept of 'will' contained visible idealistic traces, as he radically counterposed 'will' to 'objective determinations' and privileged the former. In 1918, for example, in his well-known defence of the Bolshevik Revolution from a presumed 'positivism' of Marx himself, Gramsci formulated the question of 'will' in the following way:

The dominant factor in history [is] not raw economic facts but man, men in society, men in relation to one another, reaching agreements with one another, developing through these contacts (civilization) a collective, social will; men coming to understand economic facts, judging them and adapting them to their will until this becomes the driving force of the economy and moulds objective reality, which lives and moves and comes to resemble a current of volcanic lava that can be channeled wherever and in whatever way men's will determines.²⁰

Although this might be pushing it a bit, we could say that at this stage of his evolution, Gramsci was very close to the subjectivist voluntarism of Rousseau, which can rightly be criticised: the 'collective or social will' was still judged capable of being a 'driving force of the economy' and of 'moulding objective reality'.

However, in the mature reflections of the *Notebooks*, without denying the importance of will as a constitutive moment of what he had come to call the 'philosophy of the praxis', Gramsci adopted a much more mediated position. One example, among others, is the following statement:

To escape simultaneously from solipsism and from mechanistic conceptions... it is necessary to put the question in an 'historicist' fashion, and at the same time to put the 'will' (which in the last analysis equals practical or political

20. Gramsci 1982, p. 514; 1990b, pp. 34–5.

activity) at the base of philosophy. But it must be a rational, not an arbitrary, will, which is realised in so far as it corresponds to objective historical necessities, or in so far as it is universal history itself in the moment of its progressive actualisation.²¹

In another passage, clarifying his project, Gramsci wrote:

The Modern Prince must have a part devoted to Jacobinism... as an exemplification of the concrete formation and operation of a collective will which at least in some aspects was an original, *ex novo* creation. And a definition must be given of collective will, and of political will in general, in the modern sense: will as operative awareness of historical necessity, as protagonist of a real and effective historical drama.²²

As we can see, here Gramsci achieved a movement of dialectical transcendence, not only with respect to the formulations of his early period, but also in relation to the positions on 'will' taken by Rousseau and Hegel. In the *Notebooks*, he tells us clearly that will, particularly the collective will, although it is historically determined (as in Hegel) and 'conforms to objective historical necessity', is nonetheless also an 'original, *ex novo* creation' (as in Rousseau) – even if this is so only 'in some aspects'.

We can now return to the concept of 'hegemony' and discuss briefly what Gramsci intended it to express. The author of the *Notebooks* realised that, in the more recent form of capitalism, a new sphere of social being arose, which he called 'civil society'. In contrast to what it had meant to Marx, for Gramsci, civil society does not denote the realm of social relations of production, the economic structure. Nor does Gramsci identify civil society with the state *strictu sensu*. Gramscian civil society is produced by the intersection of 'private hegemonic apparatuses' and has its genesis in the processes of socialisation of politics;²³ civil society is at the same time cause and effect of a growing complexity of the mechanisms of representation of interests and values (a complexity that ultimately results in an intensification of social stratification). It does not seem accidental that Gramsci first mentioned what he would later call 'civil society' in a reference, as I noted above, to Hegel and 'associationism'. If Hegel realised that the 'atomistic system' creates particular collective interests which express themselves in 'corporations', Gramsci in turn realised that groups and social classes, in the process of organising themselves and struggling for their own interests, create 'private' hegemonic

21. Gramsci 1975, p. 1485; 1971b, p. 345.

22. Gramsci 1975, p. 1559; 1971b, p. 130.

23. For the concept of the 'socialisation of politics,' so important for Italian Marxism, see Cerroni 1976, p. 49 ff.

apparatuses. These apparatuses are *private* because they presuppose a voluntary, contractual, adherence on the part of their members, who are thus not taking part in what Gramsci called the 'coercion-state', 'state in the narrow sense' or 'political society'; they are 'hegemonic' because, through their actions, they play an undeniable role in power-relations, defining the way through which the public sphere of society establishes itself. So we can say that Gramsci, on the one hand, took from Hegel the idea that wills are concretely determined already at the level of material or economic interests;²⁴ such wills, after all, undergo a process of universalisation – '*associationism*' – that leads to the creation of collective subjects ('corporations' in Hegel, 'hegemonic apparatuses' in Gramsci), moved by a will that tends to universalise itself, tending to go beyond merely 'economic-corporatist' interests and directing itself toward an 'ethico-political' conscience. But we can also say that Gramsci, on the other hand, viewing participation in these hegemonic apparatuses as consensual and defining the apparatuses as moments of an 'enlarged' state, introduced a clearly contractual dimension into the core of the public sphere, consequently recapturing the basic idea of Rousseau that, as we have seen, had been rejected by Hegel.

By marking the presence of this new sphere of social being with his concept of 'civil society', Gramsci made possible an enlargement of the Marxist concept of the state: while for Marx and Engels, at least in the *Communist Manifesto*, and for Lenin and the Bolsheviks, in the body of their theoretical production, the state is basically coercion, monopoly of violence at the service of the dominant economic class, for Gramsci, it appears also endowed with a new and important dimension, the dimension of consensus or legitimacy. With the socialisation of political participation, the 'Westernisation' of societies, it is no longer possible for rulers to continue to rule without the consent of the ruled. Engels himself, in 1895, had already realised that the modern state was the fruit of a contract between rulers and ruled:

The German Empire, as all little States and, in general, as all modern States, is the product of a contract; first of a contract between the princes among themselves and, afterwards, between the princes and the people.²⁵

Thus, already with Engels, the question of the contract had appeared at the core of Marxist reflection.

24. As we have seen, Gramsci takes this idea not only from Hegel, but also and particularly from Marx, who, in turn, transcends the Hegelian notion of *bürgerliche Gesellschaft*.

25. Engels 1956, pp. 121–2. It is interesting to note that this statement by the late Engels poses a marked contrast with Hegel's position stated in the quotation from the *Philosophy of Right* reproduced in note 16.

The contractualist dimension of politics in Gramsci finds its most explicit conceptual expression precisely in the concept of hegemony. Without doubt, hegemony is, for him, the moment of consensus. Although there is a different reading of Gramsci, inspired above all by Perry Anderson, that speaks of hegemony as synthesis of coercion and consensus,²⁶ to me the distinction Gramsci made between, on the one hand, hegemony, leadership and consensus, and, on the other hand, domination, dictatorship and coercion seems clear: the first three terms have their material bases in civil society, in 'private' hegemonic apparatuses, while the latter three have their material bases in the state *strictu sensu*, that is, bureaucratic and repressive apparatuses. Now, insofar as for Gramsci, in 'Western' capitalist formations, civil society (the material basis of consensus) plays a decisive role in the determination of the actions of the state (and beyond that, in communism – 'regulated society' – it assimilates the state into itself and eliminates its coercive mechanisms), it is possible to say that the author of the *Notebooks* introduced the question of contract, of inter-subjectivity, at the centre of his Marxist theory of the state and of politics. The Gramscian concept of hegemony implies a contract that takes place at the level of civil society, therefore generating collective subjects (trade-unions, parties, social movements, and such like) that have a very public, 'state' dimension. But it also implies the need for forms of contract between rulers and ruled (between state and civil society), on the grounds that, in these 'Western' societies, political obligation is rooted in a consensual acceptance, by rulers and ruled, of a minimum of procedural rules and ethico-political values. In this last case, we are certainly not neglecting the fact that contracts frequently co-exist (even if in a conflictual way) with the endurance of coercive forms;²⁷ and it should not be forgotten that such contracts are liable to permanent changes and revisions, according to the variations of what Gramsci himself called 'relations of force'. In this sense, therefore, Gramsci's approach to the idea of the contract or, in his terms, to society based on consensus, is a regulative idea in the Kantian sense, that is, a goal to which we should always proceed, by means of the 'war of position', in the direction of a 'regulated' or communist society. Analogous to Freud's suggestion that, for the unconscious, we must always try to substitute the 'ego', Gramsci seems to be saying

26. Anderson 1977. For a convincing refutation of Anderson's positions, see Francioni 1984, p. 147 ff.

27. Gramsci, one should not forget, also mentions the 'apparatus of state coercive power which "legally" enforces discipline on those groups who do not "consent", either actively or passively, but that is meant for the whole society in anticipation of the moments of crisis in command and direction, in which the consensus disappears' (Gramsci 1975, p. 1519; 1971b, p. 12).

that, in opposition to coercion, we should always try to enlarge the sphere of the contract – that is, to try progressively to build a consensual society.

Now, as was the case with Rousseau, where a solid link was established between contract and general will, in Gramsci also there is a close articulation between hegemony and what he calls ‘national-popular collective will’. Gramsci’s hegemony emerges precisely in the creation of this collective will, driving force of a ‘historical bloc’ that combines into one whole different social groups – each of which is capable of effecting, to varying degrees, the ‘cathartic’ moment of surpassing its merely ‘economic-corporatist’ interests – leading to the creation of a universalising ‘ethico-political’ conscience. This ‘cathartic’ passage from particular to universal, however, for Gramsci does not mean a repression of singular wills, as in Rousseau, but rather, as in Hegel, a dialectical *Aufhebung*, in which the ‘ethico-political’ collective will preserves and at the same time lifts to a higher level the singular and particular interests of the various components of the ‘historic bloc’. For Gramsci, therefore, both politics *strictu sensu* (the relation between rulers and ruled) and ethical life (the axiological sphere that confers concrete substance to the general or collective will) are the result of a contract, an inter-subjective interaction increasingly free of coercion. For the Italian thinker, in contrast to Hegel, ‘ethical life’ (the ‘ethico-political’) is not the result of the fatalistic and impersonal movement of an ‘objective Spirit’; neither is it, as it is in ‘vulgar Marxism’, the mere ‘reflection’ of ‘historical laws’ based on economics and formulated in an inflexible and fetishistic way. If Gramsci certainly does take from Hegel the notion of ethical life (which he names ‘hegemony’ or ‘ethico-political’), he at the same time takes from Rousseau the conception of politics as a contract, as an inter-subjective formation of a *volonté générale*, which he names ‘national-popular collective will’.

Because he took from Hegel (and Marx) the notion that will is historically and economically determined and is thus permeated by social contradictions, Gramsci was fully conscious that, in social life considered as a whole, not everything is the result of a contract. On the bases of the social ontology of Hegel and Marx, Gramsci knew that society is a specific and unique synthesis of causality and teleology, of determinism and freedom.²⁸ For him, following Marx, men certainly do make their history, but not in conditions of their own choosing: in addition to free teleological action there is also historical determinism, an objective causality that, although created by human praxis, frequently goes beyond the consciousness and will of individuals and social actors. But Gramsci also knew, again following Marx, that the more social

28. Lukács 1976–81.

being 'socialises' itself, the greater is the 'retreat of the natural boundary', or, in other words, the greater the range of freedom and autonomy of 'social individuals'.²⁹ Gramsci, certainly, does take his distances from Rousseau, for whom the social contract founds a people as such and society as a whole; but for him, even if not everything in society derives from a contract, there are wide social spheres (the political sphere, in particular) that can increasingly result from a contract, that is, from the inter-subjective action of free and conscious social individuals – precisely this possibility is at the root of Gramsci's proposal for a 'regulated society' (communism) in which the suppression of class-antagonisms would finally make possible the development of a public space founded on dialogue among and the consensus of 'social individuals'.

Therefore, in Gramsci as in Rousseau, the legitimate social order presupposes a contract that, unhindered by the conservation of economic-corporatist interests, is able to build an ethico-political general will, preserving the republican ideal of prioritising the public over the private. Moreover, both thinkers believe that the full construction of a public democratic space is possible only within a social order beyond the framework of capitalism. Nevertheless, if Gramsci could surmount the antinomies of Rousseau, 'putting on its feet' (transforming in a materialist sense) the still-idealist and abstract vision with which the author of the *Social Contract* approaches the question of general will and democracy, his ability to do so was, to a great extent, the result of his taking (through the mediation of Marx, most importantly) what was positive in the Hegelian critique of contract-theory.

Thus Gramsci aligned his reflection with the best traditions of modernity and became one of the foremost interlocutors of the democratic and socialistic culture of our times.

29. Marx 1973b, *passim*; Lukács 1978, pp. 45–6.

Appendix Two

The Neoliberal Age: Passive Revolution or Counter-Reformation?

A systematic characterisation of our age – that is, the age of globalisation or the worldwide expansion of capital, marked by the preponderance of neoliberal politics – is a task Marxists are yet to complete. In order to achieve this, a broad theoretical and empirical analysis is necessary, applying to our age the categories of political economy established by Marx and continued by many of his main followers, updating and revising them when necessary. For sure, such an analysis has already begun to bear its first fruits; in my opinion, however, these are still insufficient for a global Marxist view – if I may be allowed the pun – of globalisation.

As I am aware that I lack the skills to undertake such an analysis, I have no intention of making even the briefest outline of it, neither here nor elsewhere. I do not even intend to weigh up the already sizeable Marxist literature on the theme. I believe, however, that I can contribute to this work still in progress with a discussion – presently taking place within Gramscian studies – of the possibility of understanding some essential features of our present time using the Gramscian concept of passive revolution. To advance my conclusion, which is merely tentative and, therefore, subject to correction, I am sceptical about this possibility. I believe that, prior to speaking of passive revolution, it would be useful to try to understand many phenomena of the neoliberal age

through the concept of counter-reformation, which, as we shall see, is also a part, albeit a marginal one, of Gramsci's categorial apparatus.¹

2.1. Counter-reformation

Whereas the phrase 'passive revolution' appears frequently in the *Notebooks*, 'counter-reformation' is scarcely used. Furthermore, almost every time that it is used, Gramsci was referring directly to the movement by which the Catholic Church, in the Council of Trent, reacted against the Protestant Reformation and some of its political and cultural consequences. It must be said, however, that Gramsci not only applied the phrase to other historical contexts, but also tries to draw from it some characteristics that allow us to affirm, albeit tentatively, that he created a new concept, here.

On the possibility of extending the term throughout history, it can be seen that Gramsci, speaking of humanism in a certain passage, refers to a 'counter-reformation in advance'. Therefore, it becomes clear that, for him, there may be counter-reformations in the face of historical phenomena other than the Protestant Reformation; in that particular case, in the face of the burgeoning communes of pre-Renaissance Italy. Gramsci says,

[Arezio], then, dislikes the fact that Toffanin sees Humanism as faithful to Christianity, even though he acknowledges that even the sceptics made a show of their religiousness. The truth is that this was the first 'clerical' phenomenon in the modern sense, a Counter-Reformation before its time (otherwise, it was a Counter-Reformation regarding the communal era). They opposed the rupture of medieval and feudal universalism that was implicit in the Communes and that was suffocated at birth etc.²

In another paragraph, in which he characterises utopias as 'modern' and 'popular' reactions to the Counter-Reformation, Gramsci presents one of the distinguishing traits of the latter as something peculiar to every restoration:

The Counter-Reformation...besides, *like all restorations*, was not a homogenous bloc, but a substantial, if not formal, combination of old and new.³

I believe it is important to stress that, in this passage, Gramsci characterises the Counter-Reformation as a 'restoration' pure and simple, which is different

1. The reader is referred to Part Two of Chapter Six for a discussion of Gramsci's development of the concept of passive revolution and the contemporary debate.

2. Gramsci 1975, p. 907.

3. Gramsci 1975, p. 2292.

from what he did in the case of passive revolution, when he spoke of 'revolution-restoration'. In spite of that, however, he admits that, even in this case, there is a 'combination of old and new'. We may, therefore, suppose that the essential difference between passive revolution and counter-reformation lies in the fact that, whereas, in the former, there are certain 'restorations' that, in Gramsci's words, 'accepted a certain part of the demands expressed from below', in the latter, it is not the moment of the new that prevails, but precisely the moment of the old. The difference may be subtle, but its historical significance cannot be underestimated.

Another important observation by Gramsci mentions the fact that counter-reformation does not define itself as such, that is, as a restorative movement, but, like today's neoliberalism, tries to put on the face of 'reform'. Let us recall his words:

The Catholics (and especially the Jesuits who are more careful and consistent even in their terminology) do not want to admit that the Council of Trent was solely a reaction to Lutheranism and the whole ensemble of Protestant-like tendencies, but hold that it was a question of an autonomous, positive 'Catholic Reformation' which would have come about in any case.⁴

2.2. The welfare-state as passive revolution

As the main determinations assumed by the two notions in Gramsci's work have been outlined, we can return to the question posed in the beginning of this appendix: is the neoliberal age that began in the last decades of the twentieth century closer to a passive revolution or to a counter-reformation?

The question obviously has no meaning to neoliberal ideology itself. Not even its first proponents – hardcore doctrinaires, who at least had the merit of being sincere – saw themselves as 'conservatives'.⁵ Nowadays, the ideologues of neoliberalism like to present themselves as proponents of an alleged 'Third Way' between pure liberalism and 'statist' social democracy, so that

4. Gramsci 1975, pp. 2306–7; 1995, p. 24.

5. I am referring mainly to Friedrich von Hayek. The title of the last chapter of his famous *The Constitution of Liberty* (Hayek 1976) is, indeed, 'Why I Am Not a Conservative'. However, when compared to the current theoreticians of the so-called 'Third Way', the new incarnation of neoliberalism, Hayek was not a hypocrite – not if we consider the brilliant definition of hypocrisy given by La Rochefoucauld, the famous French moralist: 'the tribute vice pays to virtue'. Hayek never hid the fact that his greatest enemy, perhaps even greater than communism, was the reformist social democracy that fought for the welfare-state. He did not see himself as a 'reformist', but rather as someone who fought for the *restoration* of the old order, that is, of a market that supposedly was *completely free*.

they are able to pose as representatives of position essentially connected with demands of modernity (or, to put it more precisely, of postmodernity) and, therefore, of progress.⁶ The current version of the neoliberal ideology thus makes reform (or even revolution, as some like to speak of a 'liberal revolution') its great banner.

The word 'reform' has always been organically linked to the struggles of subalterns to transform society, and for this reason it has assumed, in political language, a clearly progressive and even leftist connotation. Neoliberalism thus seeks to appropriate the aura of sympathy surrounding the word 'reform'. This is why the measures proposed and implemented by it are mystified as 'reforms', that is, as something progressive when compared to the 'statism' that, either in its communist or social-democratic version, would now be irrevocably condemned to the dustbin of history. What we are seeing is an attempt to modify the meaning of the word 'reform': whereas, before the neoliberal surge, it meant more rights, social protection, controls and restrictions on the market, and so forth, now it means cuts, bans, the suppression of these rights and this control. We are faced with an operation of ideological mystification, which has, unfortunately, largely succeeded.

We have seen that the notion of passive revolution can be connected – Buci-Glucksmann and Therborn, following Gramsci, make this connection – to the idea of reform, or even of reformism, even if this reformism is ultimately conservative, 'from above'. As we have seen, a true process of passive revolution takes place when the ruling classes, pressured by those from below, accept – in order to continue their domination and even to achieve a passive consensus from the subalterns – 'a certain part of the demands expressed from below', to put it in Gramsci's words quoted above.

This was precisely what happened at the time of the welfare-state and of the governments of old-style social democracy.⁷ Indeed, the moment of *restoration* played a decisive role in the welfare-state: the interventionist policies suggested by Keynes, as well as the acceptance of many demands from the working classes, allowed capitalism to try and succeed in overcoming, at least for a while, the profound crisis that enveloped it between the two World Wars. But this *restoration* was articulated with moments of *revolution*, or, more precisely, of *reformism* in the strong sense of the word, and this was expressed

6. See, among many others, Giddens 1999.

7. It is not possible to discuss the theme here, but I believe some (though not many) of the achievements of the welfare-state were secured for urban workers in Latin America during the so-called populist era. Maybe this explains why, in our subcontinent, the term 'populism' is employed by neoliberals to dismiss any attempt to escape the constraints imposed by market-fetishism.

not only in workers securing important social rights for themselves, but also in the adoption by capitalist governments of elements of a planned economy, which until that time was defended only by socialists and communists. Certainly, the old ruling classes did continue to rule, but the subalterns were able to secure important 'victories of the political economy of labour over the political economy of property'.⁸

We must keep in mind that the welfare-state appeared at a time when the working class had, through its (political and trade-union) organisations, a strong bearing on the relation of forces between labour and capital. We must also not forget that the great welfarist passive revolution was also an answer to the great challenge made to capital by the October Revolution and also by the presence of the Soviet Union, which emerged from the Second World-War with immense prestige among the working masses of the whole world.

2.3. Neoliberalism as counter-reformation

I do not believe it is possible to find in the 'neoliberal age' (as I perhaps slightly oversimplify it) the restoration/revolution dialectic that always, according to Gramsci, characterises passive revolutions. In our present situation, the working classes have been forced – for many reasons, including the 'productive restructuring' that put an end to Fordism, and, therefore, to the corresponding forms of workers' organisation – to put themselves on the defensive: their trade-union and political expressions thus suffered a setback in the balance of forces relative to capital. Furthermore, the collapse of 'actually-existing socialism' greatly weakened the attraction of socialist ideas, which clever ideological propaganda identified with the 'statolatrous' model of the Eastern-European countries. Class-struggle, which certainly does continue to exist, is no longer fought in the name of conquering new rights, but of defending those conquered in the past.

In our present age, we are not witnessing the acceptance of 'a certain part of the demands expressed from below', something that Gramsci deemed – as we have seen – an essential feature of passive revolutions. In the neoliberal age, there is no space for the strengthening of social rights, not even in a limited sense; we are seeing the overt attempt – unfortunately, very successful for the most part – to eliminate those rights, to deconstruct and to deny the reforms already conquered by the subaltern classes during the period of passive revolution that began with Americanism and ended with the welfare-

8. The phrase is derived from Marx 1985. It originally referred to the legal limitation of working hours and to the cooperative-movement.

state. The so-called 'reforms' in social security, labour-laws, the privatisation of public-owned companies, and so on – 'reforms' which are currently on the political agenda of both central and peripheral ('emerging' is actually the new fashionable term) capitalist countries – aim at nothing but the pure and simple *restoration* of conditions proper to wild capitalism, in which the laws of the market must be allowed to run free.

We are seeing an attempt to radically suppress the 'victories of the political economy of labour' as Marx called them, and thus fully to restore the political economy of property. This is why I believe it is more adequate to use the concept of *counter-reformation* instead of *passive revolution* to describe the essential features of the contemporary age. (Besides, at least in the 'Western' countries, it is not a *counter-revolution*; there, the target of the neoliberal surge is not the results of a revolution in the strictest sense of the word, but the reformism that characterised the welfare-state.)

It is true that the neoliberal age does not completely destroy all of the achievements of the welfare-state, and this owes mostly to the resistance of the subalterns. On the other hand, there is an apparent 'concern' in neoliberal circles more connected with the 'Third Way' (and even in international financial bodies such as the World Bank) with the most disastrous consequences of neoliberal policies (which continue to be applied anyway), such as the exponential increase in poverty. This concern – which lead to alleviating and compensatory social policies like *Fome Zero* ('Zero Hunger') in Brazil – does not, however, deny the fact that we are seeing an unequivocal counter-reformation. Let us remember that Gramsci warned us, as we have seen before, about the fact that 'the Counter-Reformation... besides, like all restorations, was not a homogenous bloc, but a substantial, if not formal, combination of old and new'.⁹ A counter-reformation process is thus characterised not by the complete absence of the new, but by the vast preponderance of conservation (or even restoration) in the face of any novelties, however timid.

2.4. Transformism

As it is well-known, Gramsci drew attention to an important consequence of passive revolution: the practice of transformism as a mode of historical development, a process that attempts to exclude the subaltern classes from any protagonism in the processes of social transformation by co-opting their leaders. Although it presents itself, in Gramsci's words, as a 'dictatorship

9. Gramsci 1975, p. 2292.

without hegemony',¹⁰ the state playing the role of the protagonist of a passive revolution cannot do without some degree of consensus. Gramsci showed us how the ruling classes obtain a minimum of consensus, 'passive' consensus in the case of transition-processes 'from above', which are equally 'passive'. He spoke of Italy, but his words, when duly concretised, are just as valid for other countries and periods:

Transformism as one of the historical forms of what has already been noted about 'revolution-restoration' or 'passive revolution', with respect to the process of formation of a modern State in Italy. Transformism as a 'real historical document' of the real nature of the parties which appeared as extremist in the period of militant activity (Partito d'Azione). Two periods of transformism: 1. from 1860 to 1900 'molecular' transformism, i.e. individual political figures formed by the democratic opposition parties are incorporated individually into the conservative-moderate 'political class' (characterised by its aversion to any intervention of the popular masses in state life, to any organic reform which would substitute a 'hegemony' for the crude, dictatorial 'dominance'); 2. from 1900 onwards transformism of entire groups of leftists who pass over to the moderate camp...¹¹

One of the factors that seem to justify the use of the concept of passive revolution to characterise the age of neoliberalism is, indeed, the generalisation of transformist phenomena, both in central as well as peripheral countries. Even though I do not intend to discuss this issue more directly (it does, however, merit particular attention), I believe transformism as a political phenomenon is not exclusive to processes of passive revolution, also having possible connections with processes of counter-reformation. Were it not thus, it would be difficult to understand the mechanisms that, in our time, have marked the actions of social democrats and former communists in support of many counter-reformist governments in European countries, as well as phenomena like the Cardoso and Lula governments in Brazil, a country belonging to the periphery of capitalism. However, a deeper discussion of this important issue stretches beyond the limits of the present appendix.

10. Gramsci 1975, p. 1824; 1971b, p. 106.

11. Gramsci 1975, p. 962; 1971b, p. 58 note.

Appendix Three

Gramsci and Brazil

After the definitive collapse of so-called 'actually-existing socialism', the influence of Marxism in Brazilian cultural life, which had been very significant between the 1960s and 1980s, was greatly undermined, just as it was everywhere else. Not only liberal and conservative thinkers, but also some now-repentant, formerly-dogmatic Marxists, took advantage of a false identification between Marxism and Marxism-Leninism in an attempt to discredit the method and the categories inherited from Marx and his most lucid followers. However, whereas, in other countries, this attack was undeniably successful (at least for a while), in Brazil Marxists and the Left in general demonstrated great resilience.

This resilience came mostly from the fact that the most influential Marxist thinker in Brazil, at least for the last two decades, has been none other than Antonio Gramsci, making it difficult to identify Marxism with Marxism-Leninism. The original categories from the author of the *Prison Notebooks* have been received by many Brazilian intellectuals as the instrument most adequate for constructing an open, creative Marxism able to rectify and/or overcome the weak points coming from dogmatic readings of Marx and, above all, the legacy of the Third International and 'Marxism-Leninism'. Therefore, when the new battle against Marxism started in Brazil, it was possible to fight it with the critical weapons provided by Gramsci's reflections. If this, however, was the point of arrival of Gramsci's reception in Brazil, we

must take note of how complex and problematic that reception was. I believe it is essential to tell this story, even if only in outline, if we wish to recreate a precise vista not only of our cultural and political life in the last forty years, but also of the fierce battle of ideas in which the Brazilian Left is now enveloped.

3.1. Reception

Antonio Gramsci arrived in Brazil in the early 1960s. The scarce references to his ordeal and to his status as founder of the Communist Party of Italy, which appeared here and there in communist or leftist publications in the 1930s and immediately after the Second World-War,¹ merely confirm the fact that, before the 1960s, nobody in Brazil actually knew of his thought. This should not surprise us, if we recall that Brazilian Marxism – particularly feeble in comparison even to other Latin-American Marxisms – took the Soviet manuals of ‘Marxism-Leninism’ (a clever name for Stalinism) as its main ‘theoretical’ sources.

However, even the exceptional personalities of Brazilian Marxism, who read the ‘classics’ first-hand and referred to ‘heterodox’ authors like Henri Lefebvre and Georg Lukács, had apparently never heard of Gramsci: there is no reference to his work, for instance, in the writings of the most important Brazilian Marxists of the time, such as literary critic Astrojildo Pereira and historians Caio Prado Júnior and Nelson Werneck Sodré. By the end of the 1950s, the writer that twenty years later would become one of the most widely-read foreign authors in Brazil, and not just by Marxists, was virtually a complete unknown.

This situation began to change with the new decade. A surge in popular struggles in the years preceding the 1964 military coup led to an increase in the influence of the Left, particularly the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB), in the political and cultural life of the country. At the same time, as a result of the catharsis provoked in the PCB by the exposure of Stalin’s crimes at the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU in 1956, Brazilian Marxism entered a process, albeit timidly, of pluralistic opening. Marxist culture entered universities for the first time, and influenced various cultural apparatuses (including cultural government-apparatuses). Its grasp started to transcend the PCB, and so it had to become diversified, to open itself up to debate with other

1. Dainis Karepovs (Karepovs 1990, p. 72) discovered references to Gramsci in Brazil as early as the 1930s in Rossini 1933 and Rolland 1939. Rossini signed as ‘Um Exilado Italiano’ (‘An Italian Exile’).

ideological trends, to leave the narrow confines of the Soviet *Diamat*. Even though the leadership of the PCB did not promote such renewal, neither did it prevent the intellectuals connected with the Party from engaging in it: the leadership apparently understood that the renewal of Marxism was a necessary condition for the PCB to continue to influence the Left, which encompassed more and more intellectuals and university-students, all within a context in which the first manifestations of a leftist Christianity presented themselves as an alternative to the PCB.

It was then that the first theoretical references to Gramsci appeared, made by young Marxist intellectuals in publications connected with the PCB or influenced by it.² These references allow us to outline the main features of the first cycle of Gramsci's presence in Brazil (the cycle would go on until the middle of the 1970s, as we shall see): here, Gramsci was not the sharp theoretician of the 'extended' state and of the socialist revolution in the 'West', not even the researcher of 'non-classical' forms ('passive revolution') of the transition to capitalist modernity, but rather the 'philosopher of praxis', the proponent of a humanist and historicist reading of Marxism, radically different from the Soviet vulgate imposed on us until then.³ Therefore, it is not by chance that, in this first Brazilian incursion, Gramsci always appeared besides Lukács with his *History and Class Consciousness* and Sartre with this *Critique of Dialectical Reason*: all three were presented as central pieces of a cultural battle that was clearly anti-dogmatic, but still substantially focused on the areas of philosophy, aesthetics, and the sociology of culture. Thus a 'division of labour' was – perhaps unawares – created, the effects of which seriously harmed the success of the first Gramscian cycle in Brazil: Communist intellectuals were more or less free to act within the realm of culture, proposing a philosophical and aesthetical renewal of Brazilian Marxism, but the last word on specifically-political questions still belonged to the leadership of the Party. This caused an ambiguous – and, in the long run, impossible – coexistence between 'Western Marxism' in culture and 'Marxism-Leninism' in politics.

The orientation towards the 'Westernisation' of theoretical Marxism was not stopped by the 1964 military coup; it even became stronger and more intense during the 'liberal' period of the dictatorship (while some constitutional guarantees remained in force). This period lasted until the Institutional

2. References to Gramsci can be found in Coutinho 1961, p. 38 ff.; Coutinho 1963, p. 48 ff; and Konder 1963, p. 48 ff. Konder would return to Gramsci in Konder 1965, *passim*, and Konder 1967, pp. 109–20.

3. In Argentina, where Gramsci's reception began as early as the 1950s, the situation was different: from the very first moment, Gramsci was part of a political struggle within the Argentinian CP and his thought was soon used as a tool for the examination of Argentinian history. See Aricó 1988, an author who is sorely missed.

Act Number Five, effective in December 1968, suppressed these guarantees and torture became a state-policy. The one-sided 'philosophico-cultural' nature of the movement that was renewing Marxism was encouraged not only by the 'division of labour' already mentioned, but also by the very nature of the first phase of the military dictatorship: although censorship was everywhere, it was more intense in the area of specifically political thought than in the area of philosophy or aesthetics. The initiative of these young communist intellectuals found the support of a publishing-house, *Civilização Brasileira* (which then had Marxists such as Ênio da Silveira and Moacyr Félix as its directors), and finally many authors were published in Brazil: besides Gramsci, there was Georg Lukács, Lucien Goldmann, Adam Schaff, Walter Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno, Herbert Marcuse and others. The monopoly of Soviet manuals was definitely broken: Brazilian Marxism entered an age of pluralism.

It was within this context that the project of the Portuguese edition of the *Prison Letters* and the thematic edition of the *Notebooks* was conceived and partially executed. I believe the order chosen for the volumes' publication, slightly different from the Italian edition, was emblematic. First, the plan included the publication of a broad selection from the *Letters* and the volume *Historical Materialism and the Philosophy of Benedetto Croce* (fearing censorship, the Brazilian publisher decided to call it *The Dialectical Conception of History*), which appeared in 1966. These would be followed by *The Intellectuals and the Organisation of Culture* and an abridged edition of *Literature and National Life*, published in 1968; only later the specifically political writings like *Notes on Machiavelli*, *Il Risorgimento* and *Past and Present* (only the first was published, by the end of 1968; the latter two were not even translated, not only because of the Institutional Act Number Five already mentioned, but also because of the commercial failure of the volumes that had been published). It must be noted that the publication of Gramsci's pre-prison political writings was not part of the plan.

The first 'operation Gramsci' had, as its promoters saw it, one clear goal: to introduce Gramsci to the Brazilian reader mainly as a philosopher and literary critic, in whose work the strictly political dimension was secondary. This is how Gramsci is presented, for instance, in the introduction to *The Dialectical Conception of History*, the first book to be published. After a brief biography of Gramsci (which followed a version that accorded with the 'official' interpretation of Togliatti's PCI), there was a theoretical introduction in which Gramsci appeared as an important philosopher, who, thanks to his peculiar concept of praxis, was able to overcome both Croce's materialism and Bukharin's 'vulgar materialism', thus becoming, as the authors of this

introduction put it, the thinker who 'best defined the true nature of Marxist philosophy'.⁴ As for the theoretico-political dimension of Gramsci's thought, discussed only in a few lines, the authors – following Togliatti's reading on this point, too – present Gramsci as someone who simply continued Lenin's work, without even mentioning the moments in which he overcomes and extends the Russian revolutionary. On the other hand, when they considered Gramsci's possible contribution to the analysis of what was peculiar to Brazilian reality, the translators and organisers of the other volumes referred only to literary issues and the problem of the intellectuals, which were determined by the absence of a true national-popular dimension in Brazil as well. There was no allusion to the possibility that Gramsci's thought could be used for a radical re-evaluation of the question of democracy and socialism in Brazil.

This first attempt to introduce Gramsci to Brazilian readers had little impact. Our author was published at a moment when vast sectors of the leftist intelligentsia radicalised their opposition to a dictatorship that also became more radical, and so they no longer saw in the political proposals of the PCB (and of the Marxist culture it influenced) a proper answer to the challenges posed by the new situation. In its politico-strategic formulations, the PCB still presented Brazil as 'backward', semi-feudal and semi-colonial, requiring a 'bourgeois-democratic' revolution or 'national liberation' as a necessary condition for finding the path of social progress. Using the famous Gramscian categories, Brazil was seen as an 'Eastern' society, to be analysed using the paradigms the Third International had established for China, and not as a social formation that was predominantly capitalist and even 'Western'.

Thus, in this first moment, the PCB did not see the dictatorship as a means used by the high bourgeoisie to increase the modernisation of capitalism, bringing it to the stage of monopolist state-capitalism, but, rather, as an instrument with which landowners and external 'imperialist agents' wished to arrest our development. Such errors of analysis prevented many intellectuals from seeing the aptness of the tactic proposed by the PCB to fight the dictatorship: a gradualist tactic, aiming at the construction of a broad spectrum of alliances, through a process then called 'accumulation of forces'. There was in this tactic something of the Gramscian 'war of position'; however, as it was presented not as part of a new theory for the revolution in the 'West', but as the consequence of the conception of the 'bourgeois-democratic revolution' by stages, this tactic was seen by many intellectuals of the Left as an expression of opportunism and political surrender.

4. Coutinho and Konder 1966, pp. 1–6.

It was only natural, then, that the baby was thrown out with the bath-water: the rejection of the strategic analytical models prepared by the PCB led not only to the condemnation of the tactic it wished to put into practice, but also to a growing unease with the proposals for philosophico-cultural renewal presented by its intellectuals. Gramsci's (and Lukács's) historico-dialectical rationalism began to be seen as the manifestation of a conservative and anachronistic tendency, while the proposals for the defence of the national-popular in the areas of culture and literature were simultaneously identified with a strictly 'nationalist' and 'populist' attitude. So it was that Marcuse's 'Great Refusal' and Althusser's allegedly-radical 'epistemological revolution' were favoured as more adequate answers to the urgent tasks imposed by the new situation. Marcuse and Althusser became part of an eclectic mix, which further included the soup that the so-called New Left later fed off of the so-called 'New Left', defined by the belief that armed struggle was the only way to defeat the dictatorship and solve the country's problems. To the extent that they proposed the revolutionary methods used in 'Eastern' societies, the harsh critics of the PCB, paradoxically, ended up proving themselves to be believers in a 'backward' Brazil, an image that, as we have seen, constituted the central core of the strategy of the PCB itself. Thus was formed a climate in which the 'philosophy of praxis', 'intellectual and moral reform' and the defence of a 'national-popular' culture seemed proposals so removed from reality as a discussion on the sex of angels. It was not by chance that there were constant new editions of the Brazilian translations of Marcuse and Althusser, whereas the translations of Gramsci (and of Lukács, incidentally) stayed on the shelves, being sold only at heavy discounts.

The armed struggle soon proved to be a failure. This was already clear by the beginning of the 1970s, but the situation did not immediately change. The cultural environment remained hostile towards a fair appreciation of Gramsci at least until the second half of the decade. On the one hand, the ultra-leftist Althusserian trend turned to an ever-more sterile academic scholasticism that, together with French structuralism, shared hegemony over the intellectual production of the academy and publishers in the humanities. On the other, there was a rapid passage from 1968-style *gauchisme* to overt irrationalism among those who maintained the Marcusean spirit of the 'Great Refusal': a misunderstood Marcuse who first worked as a stimulus for the armed struggle against the dictatorship was then converted in one of the main sources of inspiration for the so-called 'counter-culture', which believed that the 'evils' to be fought were no longer dictatorship, and not even capitalism, but, rather, the whole cultural legacy of the Enlightenment, based on reason and the scientific spirit, which were accused of playing in contemporary society the role

of repressors of subjectivity and free individuality. So, within a context where Althusser's 'scientism' and the 'orientalist' irrationalism of counter-culture prevailed, Gramsci's rationalist and dialectical historicism seemed like a fish out of water.

Even though this not-so-happy ending of the first Gramscian cycle in Brazil was partly determined by the difficult politico-institutional conditions in which it took place, it was also derived from the internal contradictions that distinguished the project of the communist intellectuals who conceived and promoted it. As the aforementioned 'division of labour' prevented our 'Gramscians' from using the master's reflections to re-evaluate the peculiarities of Brazilian reality and the theory of the socialist revolution itself, it caused Gramsci's legacy to be presented, in a first moment, as compatible with a traditional 'Marxist-Leninist' view of Brazilian reality and of the struggle for socialism, or even as a variation of it.

The essential novelty in Gramsci's work thus remained in the shadows: he was treated only as a philosopher and theoretician of culture, without it being duly stressed, as one Brazilian would do in 1981, that

...politics is the focal point through which Gramsci analyses the totality of social life, the problems of culture, of philosophy etc. Gramsci's essential contribution lies in the sphere of political theory – or, to put it more broadly, in the creation of a Marxist ontology of political praxis.⁵

The first Gramscians in Brazil deserve the credit for drawing attention to the philosophico-cultural aspect of the master's work. However, in an environment where anti-ideological scientism and 'counter-cultural' irrationalism prevailed, even among the Left, Gramsci's philosophical reflections – in any case, disconnected from that which constituted their specific novelty – made no impact. Only when the undeniable political dimension of the thought of the *Prison Notebooks*' author emerged in Brazil was it possible for the interest in Gramsci as a philosopher and cultural critic to be reborn, now within a perspective that was able to fully recover the universal dimension of his theoretical work.

We can thus speak of a second cycle in Gramsci's reception in Brazil. It began in the mid-1970s. Between 1975 and 1980, 24 titles about our author were published, as opposed to a mere three in the first cycle. All works by Gramsci published between 1966 and 1968 were also republished.⁶ I believe

5. Coutinho 1981, p. 12.

6. An exhaustive list of works by and about Gramsci published in Brazil can be found at <<http://www.gramsci.org>>.

such a significant comeback has two main causes. First, it was then that the process of political opening that eroded the military régime began. The victory of the Brazilian Democratic Movement (the only legal opposition party, a big tent of diverse political and social forces, from conservative liberals to communists) in the parliamentary elections of 1974 forced the military government to decrease censorship, this creating a climate of relative liberty in cultural life, similar to that of 1964–8. Furthermore, even more importantly, the Left began a self-critical re-evaluation of its old models.

The failure of the armed struggle in all its variations (Maoist, Castroite, Trotskyist) helped make clear the fact that Brazilian society had become more complex; it had become more ‘Westernised’ and therefore more impervious to revolutionary models copied from ‘Eastern’ societies. Even though it did condemn resorting to armed struggle and proposed a gradualist tactic, which, in any case, began to prove effective, the PCB was unable to benefit from the crisis in the ultra-Left: as we have seen, its adept tactic – which in practice corresponded to Gramsci’s ‘war of position’ – was legitimised by arguments inspired by old paradigms from the Third International. Such ‘duplicity’ made it difficult for PCB to have a real influence over the Left’s new political culture arising in this rich period of Brazilian life. The emergence of a new, dynamic civil society as a protagonist in the struggle for democratic freedoms led to Brazilian society being acknowledged as ‘Western’, which demanded a radical re-evaluation of the ‘democratic question’ in Brazil and, more broadly, also demanded a new attitude concerning the link between democracy and socialism. In spite of the PCB’s hesitation before this task, a worldwide phenomenon – the emergence of Eurocommunism – deeply shook international communist culture, having repercussions in Brazil as well. The statement that democracy is a ‘historical, universal value’, made in Moscow in 1977 by Enrico Berlinguer, head of the PCI at the time, was for many Brazilian leftist intellectuals a definitive point of rupture with ‘Marxism-Leninism’.

It was within this context that Gramsci’s thought again began circulating in Brazil. In this new cycle, Gramsci was no longer presented just as an important philosopher or cultural sociologist, but mainly as the greatest Marxist theoretician of politics; accordingly, his work was now presented as able to provide the foundations for a conception of socialism adequate to the needs of the modern and ‘Western’ country Brazil had become in the 1970s. As in the beginning of the 1960s, the main promoters (now, however, not the only ones) of this new ‘operation Gramsci’ were intellectuals connected with the PCB, some of whom had played a major role in the first cycle, others younger. The most significant novelty, however, was that now not one of them accepted the old ‘division of labour’: the recovery of Gramsci’s legacy became the privileged

moment in an operation overtly aiming at rupture with the doctrinal sclerosis of the PCB leadership, with the models inherited from the Third International. At the same time, an alternative was proposed, a new leftist political culture fit for modern Brazil and attuned to the highest points in international Marxist thought. Marco Aurélio Nogueira, one of the most active 'Gramscians' of this new era, remarked a few years later that

Gramscianism was strengthened in Brazil as a part (possessing a strong singularity) of a new theory of socialism, collectively – and therefore plurally – created by one party, the PCI... Gramsci's thought and the theoretico-political elaborations of the PCI – the 'Italian Marxism of the 1970s' – acted in Brazil as revitalisers of a left that had fallen to pieces on the organisational level.⁷

Initially, the goal was clear: to make the PCB the main representative of the new theory of socialism and, as a consequence, to turn it into the centre of attraction of the New Left, hoping to put an end to its organisational mess. But, soon, there was a clash between the 'Eurocommunist' Gramscians and the old party-leadership. At the beginning, the clash was only implicit, when the Eurocommunists made a tactical alliance with the leadership in order to defeat the ultra-dogmatism of old Brazilian Communist chief Luís Carlos Prestes, but it became overt when the leadership adopted some of Prestes's theses – after he had stepped down – in an attempt to neutralise his undeniable influence over the older members of the Party. The leadership did not hesitate to transform the 'Gramscians' into a supposed 'Right' that still had to be defeated after the victory over Prestes's 'Left'. For the PCB's Gramscians, the only alternative Left – especially after the 1981 military coup in Poland, praised by the leadership as one more 'victory of actually-existing socialism' – was to abandon the Party *en masse*.

The following years, which saw the end of the long transition from dictatorship to democracy, proved that it was actually the PCB that lost the battle against the 'Gramscians'. As the Party's influence on social movements and intellectuals kept decreasing, Gramsci's thought and the new theory of socialism now associated with him only spread, achieving various consensuses across broad political and cultural layers. This spread, as we will see, went beyond a strictly political context, reaching social thought in general and especially academia.

But, even with an overtly political proposal, Brazilian 'Gramscianism' continued its advance. It is curious to observe, as an indicative fact, that some of

7. Nogueira 1987, p. 137.

Gramsci's concepts, particularly 'civil society', became commonplace in our political writing, both academic and journalistic, especially in the 1980s. What is more important, though, is that Gramsci's thought by then had begun to expand into various sectors of the Left – a Left that, especially after the creation of the Workers' Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*, PT), was for, the first time, in Brazilian history formed mainly by people and social movements from outside the PCB.

The expansion of Gramsci's influence on different parties and environments certainly did have a positive aspect: it made him one of the most discussed foreign thinkers in Brazil. Such an expansion brought many different 'readings' of his work – a natural result of the complexity of his thought – even if some are not defensible from a philological point of view. This is how Gramsci is frequently presented in Brazil (and, in any case, almost everywhere): sometimes a social-democratic semi-liberal, sometimes as an old-fashioned revolutionary, anti-parliamentary and insurrectionist.

An obvious example of an arbitrary reading of Gramsci can be found in many instances of the use of 'civil society',⁸ one of his most important concepts. This mistaken understanding has an 'empirical' cause: in the context of the struggle against the dictatorship, 'civil society' became identified with everything that opposed the dictatorial state. The identification was easily possible because, during the final period of the dictatorship, just as the second Gramscian cycle began, even the non-governmental organisations connected with big capital (the true beneficiary of the military régime) started to break away from the dictatorship and to manifest a timid opposition, as they sensed their inevitable decline. This led to a problematic understanding of the concept: the civil society/state pair, which, in Gramsci's words, forms an 'identity-distinction',⁹ took on the features of a radical dichotomy, suggesting a Manichean approach.

In direct opposition to what Gramsci says, this reading made everything that comes from 'civil society' look positive, while everything that has to do with the state appears very negative. I do not believe it was by chance that, during this period, the reading of Gramsci – by many Brazilian leftist intellectuals – was accompanied by a non-critical reception of Bobbio, as if there were no basic contradictions between Gramsci the communist and Bobbio the liberal. This was the point when part of the Brazilian leftist intelligentsia began adopting positions that, although social-democratic at first, have recently become clearly neoliberal.

8. See Coutinho 2000.

9. Gramsci 1975, p. 1028.

This conceptual confusion, often presented as the true Gramscian theory, helped to obscure, at the moment of transition, the contradictory nature of the social forces that formed the new Brazilian civil society. Matters were aggravated, however, when, by the end of the 1980s, the rising neoliberal ideology took hold of the Manichean dichotomy between state and civil society in order to present everything to do with the state in negative terms (even if now the state was under the rule of law, and thus subject to pressures from the subaltern classes), and make an uncritical apology for an alienated, hollow civil society, converted into a mythical 'third sector' falsely placed beyond both state and market.

We cannot forget, however, that the second Gramscian cycle did not stay confined to the domain of politics in the strictest sense of the word, having actually had a very large scope. It was only then, for instance, that Gramsci's thought entered academia, at least in a systematic way. It is indicative that, from the 34 monographs or collections on Gramsci published until now that were written or edited by a Brazilian, at least 16 are academic theses (and there are many other as yet unpublished). Beginning in 1975, but mostly in the last twenty years, there has been much important university-research that is directly influenced by Gramscian categories or problematics. This research covers a vast thematic terrain, from anthropology and philosophy to sociology and political science, discussing various subjects like popular culture, religion, education, literature, and social policy.

On the other hand, the interest in Gramsci now transcends the circle of Marxist intellectuals and leftist parties. One may note, for instance, the clear presence of Gramsci's thought in liberation-theology, still one of the most important trends in Brazil,¹⁰ even after the attacks of popes Wojtyla and Ratzinger. Even liberals have taken an interest in Gramsci, and their reaction to him has not always been mere aversion; in the case of the supposedly most-important liberal thinkers, Gramsci was even approached with sympathy, though they attempted to void his reflections of their true content, that is, his socialist and revolutionary stance. This is what we find, for instance, in the works of José Guilherme Merquior and in Oliveiros S. Ferreira's works on Gramsci.¹¹ While still president of Brazil, sociologist Fernando Henrique Cardoso, in an interview published in a magazine with a wide circulation – and clearly inspired, albeit not openly so, by a piece by Massimo D'Alema,¹² which had

10. See Regidor 1989, pp. 75–89, still a relevant essay.

11. Merquior 1987, pp. 135–55; Ferreira 1986, *passim*.

12. D'Alema 1997. The piece is entitled 'Gramsci, That Liberal – What a Heretic'. It is the closing statement of the conference *Gramsci e il Novecento*, promoted by the Fondazione Istituto Gramsci in April 1997.

just appeared in Brazil – mentioned Gramsci repeatedly in order to justify his privatisations, stating that the Sardinian thinker was anti-state and thus a proponent of a ‘liberal revolution’.¹³

More recently, even right-wing Brazilian thought has been paying attention to Gramsci. For journalists like Olavo de Carvalho and Reinaldo Azevedo, who frequently write for major Brazilian newspapers, Gramsci, not Lenin, is the real enemy: Gramsci’s theory of hegemony is presented as a subtle form of ‘brainwashing’ aimed at destroying common sense and thus paving the ground for the triumph of communism. Carvalho does not hesitate to say that Gramsci and the Gramscians have already won in Brazil, as they control not only the government and the state-bureaucracy, but also the press and the whole education-system. According to this journalist (who likes to present himself as a ‘philosopher’), only the armed forces have resisted ‘Gramscianism’: the call for a military coup is therefore clear...¹⁴ In order to confirm this hypothesis, a reformed general – apparently feeling nostalgic about the dictatorship – has recently written a whole book, in which he warns the ‘naïve’ about the dangers of Gramsci’s proposals.¹⁵

All this intense interest in Gramsci led to the publication, between 1999 and 2005, of a new Brazilian edition of Gramsci’s works in 10 volumes: six devoted to the complete *Notebooks*, two to an anthology of his pre-prison writings, and two to the *Prison Letters*.¹⁶ Many volumes of this edition have already been republished many times.

3.2. Uses

What can explain the Brazilian ‘adoption’ of Gramsci, an author who refers to Brazil only once in his whole work?¹⁷ For me, the answer is clearly to be found not in his direct statements, but rather in his method and basic concepts: that is, it is by means of his *universality* that he is able to enlighten some decisive aspects of our national *particularity*. I will discuss, here, two of these concepts: ‘passive revolution’, which can provide, I believe, important indications for the analysis of the processes of ‘conservative modernisation’ that characterise Brazilian history; and the ‘extended state’, through which

13. Cardoso 1997.

14. Carvalho 1994; Carvalho 2000.

15. Coutinho, S.A.A. 2002.

16. Gramsci 1999–2002; Gramsci 2004; Gramsci 2005. For the criteria used for editing the *Notebooks*, see Coutinho 1999, pp. 30–2; and Simionatto 2002, pp. 73–5.

17. Brazil is briefly mentioned in an interesting (though imprecise) remark on the role of intellectuals in Latin America. See Gramsci 1975, p. 1529; 1971b, p. 22.

we will be able to point at some of the essential features of our present situation (that is, the fact that Brazil today is a social formation of the 'Western' type), and thus provide indications for the creation of a democratic strategy for the struggle for socialism in Brazil.

In spite of what the 'Marxist-Leninist' tradition believed, Brazil went through a process of capitalist modernisation that did not force the country to make its 'democratic-bourgeois revolution', nor a 'revolution of national liberation' in the Jacobin fashion: precapitalist rural estates and imperialist dependence did not prove themselves insurmountable obstacles to full capitalist development. On the one hand, the large rural estates were gradually transformed, 'from above', into capitalist agrarian businesses; on the other, the internationalisation of the domestic market increased the level of foreign capital, leading to Brazil's transformation into a modern industrial country, with a very high urbanisation-rate and a complex social structure. Both processes have been bolstered by the state: instead of being the result of popular movements, that is, of a process led by a revolutionary bourgeoisie able to draw behind it the peasant-masses and the urban workers, capitalist transformation resulted from an understanding between sections of the classes that ruled the economy, leaving out the popular forces and making permanent use of the state's apparatuses of repression and economic intervention. In this sense, all the concrete options with which Brazil was faced, either directly or indirectly connected with the transition to capitalism (from the political independence in 1822 until the coup of 1964, including the proclamation of the republic in 1889 and the Revolution of 1930) were chosen 'from above', that is, in a way that was élitist and anti-popular.¹⁸

Even though Lenin's notion of the 'Prussian path' could work as an interpretive key to this process of transformation from above, only recently did it start being used in Marxist analyses of Brazilian reality. In any case, as Lenin's concept focuses primarily on the infrastructural aspects, it cannot fully apprehend the superstructural characteristics that accompany – and in many cases determine – this mode of transition. So, it is not by chance that the recent attempts to apply the concept of the 'Prussian path' to Brazil have almost always been complemented by Gramsci's notion of 'passive revolution'. As this concept, like all other Gramscian concepts, heavily stresses the superstructural moment – and the political moment above all, thus overcoming the economistic tendencies that were present in the Marxism of the Third International – it proved immensely useful for contributing to analysis of the

18. For examinations of aspects of Brazilian history that articulate the concept of the 'Prussian path' and the Gramscian category of 'passive revolution', see, among others, Vianna 1997 and Coutinho 2005.

Brazilian path to capitalism, a path in which the Brazilian state frequently played the leading role.

Nowadays, the literature on Gramsci unanimously acknowledges that the notion of 'passive revolution' or 'revolution-restoration' has a special place in the reflections contained in the *Notebooks*. This notion is a key instrument used by Gramsci not only to understand the formation of the bourgeois state in Italy (the events of the *Risorgimento*, which led to Italian national unity), but also to outline the essential features of the transition of Italian capitalism to its monopolist stage, regarding Fascism as a form of 'passive revolution'. The concept is also used by Gramsci as a more general interpretative criterion: one need only think, for instance, of his proposal to read the Americanist and Fordist experience using this concept.¹⁹

It would not be difficult to detect the presence of the main features of Gramsci's 'passive revolution' in the main transformations 'from above' that happened in Brazil. As the dominant classes reacted to actual or potential popular movements, they devoted themselves to 'restorations' that ultimately led to significant changes in class-composition and thus paved the way for new, real transformations. I will discuss only one example, which I think is indicative: the so-called 'Revolution of 1930' that led to the Vargas dictatorship in 1937, the climax of the troubled period that began in 1922, the year of the foundation of the PCB and of the first revolt of the young officers, the *Tenentes*. At that time, the workers' movement fought for social and political rights, whereas the urban middle-classes demanded greater political participation in the apparatuses of power. These pressures 'from below', even if disorganised, caused a sector of the ruling agrarian oligarchy – the stratum most connected with production for the internal market – to take the lead in the Revolution of 1930. One of its leaders expressed the meaning of the Revolution when he said: 'We must make the revolution before the people do it'. What we have here is the Brazilian version of the famous sentence by a character from Lampedusa's *Il Gattopardo*: 'We must change everything so that everything stays the same'.

In spite of its conservative nature, the triumph of the Revolution of 1930 led to the formation of a new power-bloc, in which the oligarchic stratum connected with export-agriculture was placed in a subaltern position, at the same time that a politico-military alliance with the moderate wing of the middle-classes (represented by the lieutenants) was attempted. The élitist nature of the new power-bloc, however, left the popular sectors still marginalised. They were not yet sufficiently organised; they were represented only by a weak

19. Gramsci's concept of 'passive revolution' is more fully discussed in Chapter Six, Section Two and in Appendix Two.

Communist Party and by a small group of leftist lieutenants, among whom was Luiz Carlos Prestes, that had refused to participate in the Revolution of 1930. In such conditions, the result of the protest against the revolution's élitist nature was the adoption (or the resumption) of an 'elementary subversivism', the most evident manifestation of which was the 1935 *putsch*, a disastrous initiative that came from both the Communists and the leftist lieutenants.

The *putsch* was easily controlled by the government, and served as the main pretext for the establishment in 1937 of the Vargas dictatorship. However, in spite of its repressive nature and of its Fascist-style ideological cover, Vargas's '*Estado Novo*' ('New State') promoted the country's fast industrialisation with help from the industrial fraction of the bourgeoisie and the military. Furthermore, it established labour-laws long demanded by the proletariat (minimum-wage, paid vacations, pensions, and so on), although it also imposed corporatist union-laws, directly copied from Mussolini's *Carta del Lavoro*, which linked the unions to the state and eliminated their autonomy. Thus both the Revolution of 1930 and Vargas's dictatorship can be defined, in Gramscian fashion, as moments of a 'passive revolution' or of a 'progressive restoration'.

However, in his discussions of Italian history, Gramsci did not restrict application of the notion of passive revolution to the consolidation-period of capitalism; he also used it as a tool for explaining the capitalist transition from the stage of competition to the stage of monopoly, as manifested by Fascism. These indications can be used to understand the best part of the aims of the dictatorial régime established in Brazil by the 1964 military coup. As we shall see later on, it cannot be characterised as a 'classic' fascist régime, but the goals of its economic policy bear a strong resemblance to those of Italian Fascism: the productive forces of industry experienced a strong development thanks to heavy state-intervention, aiming at consolidating the expansion of monopolist capital. Land-structure, in its turn, still kept the large estates as its central axis, but that did not prevent it from being deeply transformed: today big capitalist companies – 'agribusiness', as it is called – prevail. The technocratic-military stratum that took hold of the state-apparatus certainly did control and restrict the activity of private capital, to the extent that it subordinated the interests of 'multiple capitals' to 'capitals as a whole'; however, it adopted this 'Caesarist' position towards the various sections of the bourgeoisie precisely in order precisely to maintain and reinforce private profit as a principle and to conserve the power of the traditional ruling classes, whether they be the industrial and financial bourgeoisie (both Brazilian and foreign), or the land-owners, who were becoming more and more capitalist.

At times, the technocratic-military régime was able to achieve a significant degree of consensus (albeit passive consensus) among large sectors of the middle-classes. It was able to achieve this to the exact extent that it made

itself the leader of the modernisation-process, even if that modernisation still maintained and reproduced elements of 'backwardness'. In other words, it achieved consensus to the extent that it assimilated and answered some of the demands of the social groups defeated in 1964. In the case of the Brazilian dictatorship, we had, therefore, something similar to an element peculiar to Italian Fascism, according to Gramsci:

What is important from the political and ideological point of view is that it is capable of creating – and indeed does create – a period of expectation and hope, especially in certain Italian social groups such as the great mass of urban and rural petit bourgeois. It thus reinforces the hegemonic system and the forces of military and civil coercion at the disposal of the traditional ruling classes.²⁰

The concept of passive revolution thus constitutes an important interpretative criterion for the understanding not only of the major events in Brazilian history, but also, in a more general sense, of the whole transition process undergone by our country towards capitalist modernity and, more recently, monopolist capital. As a result, it can also provide us with analytical instruments able to indicate decisive features of our political and social formation. I would like to draw attention to two causes-effects of passive revolution that were pointed out by Gramsci: on the one hand, there is a strengthening of the state to the detriment of civil society, or, more concretely, the preponderance of dictatorial forms of supremacy to the detriment of hegemonic forms; on the other, the use of transformism as a means of historical development, causing the exclusion of the popular masses.

After examining the role of Piedmont in the *Risorgimento*, Gramsci makes an observation that can be applied to Brazil as well:

This fact is of the greatest importance for the concept of 'passive revolution' – the fact, that is, that what was involved was not a social group which 'led' other groups, but a State which... 'led' the group which should have been 'leading'... The important thing is to analyse more profoundly the significance of a 'Piedmont'-type function in passive revolutions – i.e. the fact that a State replaces the local social groups in leading a struggle of renewal.²¹

Certainly, there is a fundamental difference between the *Risorgimento* and the case of Brazil: whereas in Italy one state, Piedmont, plays the decisive role in

20. Gramsci 1975, p. 1228.

21. Gramsci 1975, p. 1823; 1971b, pp. 105–6.

the construction of a new unified national state, the state that plays the role of leader of passive revolutions in Brazil is already a unified state. I believe that this difference, though not negligible, seems to slip into the background when we consider the fact that the Brazilian state historically had the same role that Gramsci ascribes to Piedmont, that is, that of substituting for social classes in their role as protagonists of transformation-processes, and taking upon itself the task of politically 'leading' the very classes that ruled the economy. What is more, the result of this process, in the case of Brazil, has strong analogies with the Italian situation as described by Gramsci:

It is one of the cases in which these groups have the function of 'domination' without that of 'leadership': dictatorship without hegemony. The hegemony will be exercised by a part of the social group over the entire group, and not by the latter over other forces in order to give power to the movement, radicalise it, etc. on the 'Jacobin' model.²²

In Brazil also, transformations have always been the result of a displacement of the hegemonic function from one section of the ruling classes to another. As a whole, however, they have never played, at least until recently, an effectively-hegemonic role as regards the popular masses. They preferred to delegate the function of political domination to the state – that is, to the military and techno-bureaucratic stratum – which assumed the task of 'controlling' and repressing the subaltern classes when necessary. Such an anti-Jacobin mode of transition to capitalism does not mean, however, that the Brazilian bourgeoisie did not complete its 'revolution': it did so precisely through the model of passive revolution.

'Dictatorship without hegemony', however, does not imply that the state acting as the protagonist of a passive revolution can do without consensus: otherwise it would have to resort to coercion and only to coercion, which in the long run would simply prevent it from functioning. It was none other than Gramsci who indicated the way to achieving the minimum consensus in processes of transition 'from above'. Gramsci spoke of 'transformism', that is, of the assimilation of the rival fractions of the ruling classes, or even of sectors from the subaltern classes, by the bloc in power. After having established an organic relation between transformism and passive revolution, Gramsci showed that in the history of Italy there have been

...two periods of transformism: 1. from 1860 to 1900 'molecular' transformism, i.e. individual political figures formed by the democratic opposition parties

22. Ibid.

are incorporated individually into the conservative-moderate 'political class' (characterised by its aversion to any intervention of the popular masses in state life, to any organic reform which would substitute a 'hegemony' for the crude, dictatorial 'dominance'); 2. from 1900 onwards transformism of entire groups of leftists who pass over to the moderate camp...²³

Both types of transformism can be seen in Brazilian history as well. The 'molecular' type has, certainly, been the most frequent, appearing as the assimilation of some opposition-politicians by the power-bloc, a process that took place from the imperial days until the administrations of Fernando Henrique Cardoso (a former leftist intellectual who began the neoliberal age in Brazil) and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (a former union-leader who consolidated neoliberalism). Such 'molecular' transformism also played a decisive role in our cultural life, through the assimilation by the state of a great number of intellectuals who represented, either actually or potentially, the values of the subaltern classes. These intellectuals were frequently co-opted into the state-bureaucracy, a stratum inherited from Portuguese colonisation and reinforced during the Empire that never ceased to grow during the whole republican era, as the state itself increased its leadership of the political and economic transformations that prepared or consolidated capitalism. Such transformist action regarding intellectuals was undoubtedly made easier by the weakness of civil society, and particularly of the 'private' cultural organisms, making it very difficult for any intellectual not co-opted by the state even to sustain themselves.²⁴

Throughout Brazilian history, there have also been attempts to assimilate whole groups and social classes that belonged to the opposition. In many aspects, 'populism' – a mode of charismatic legitimisation that was born during the Vargas dictatorship, between 1937 and 1945, and became fully developed in the liberal-democratic period running from 1945 to 1964 – can be interpreted as an attempt to assimilate the urban workers living on salaries into the power-bloc, but in a subaltern position, through the concession of social rights and real economic advantages. In this case, transformist action did not achieve complete success, not only because of resistance from the most combative sectors of the working class, but also because it was impossible to guarantee to the workers as a whole the minimum material requirements for the so-called 'populist pact', especially in times of economic crisis. There is no

23. Gramsci 1975, p. 962.

24. The effects of transformism on Brazilian intellectuals, and particularly their negative impact on the formation of a national-popular culture in the country were analysed with the help of Gramscian concepts in Coutinho 2005, pp. 33–68.

doubt, however, that the populist form of legitimacy obtained a qualified success, especially during the second Vargas administration and the Kubitschek administration. This success allowed for a broad consensus to be achieved by the national-developmentist policy applied in that period, a policy defined by accelerated processes of import-substitution and industrialisation. Rural workers living on wages and peasants remained excluded from the populist pact. They continued to be deprived of their social labour-rights and – to the extent that most of them were illiterate – from the right to vote. Such exclusion allowed the old land-oligarchy to stay in the power-bloc, but it also helped the industrial bourgeoisie, to the extent that it vastly increased the reserve-army of industrial labour, and thus exerted a downward pressure on the wages of urban workers. I believe that it would very interesting to undertake a re-evaluation of the problematic of so-called populism using the Gramscian concepts of ‘passive revolution’ and ‘transformism’. This mode of transformism is apparently again in force, as the Lula administration was successful in co-opting and neutralising a large part of the social movements, particularly the unions, which, until the Workers’ Party came to power in 2003, frequently took a stance of clear opposition towards neoliberalism.

Now, when Gramsci spoke of ‘dictatorship without hegemony’ as a manifestation of passive revolution, he indicated one of the fundamental characteristics of the social formations that follow this mode of historical development. If transitions ‘from above’ are made by the state, this means that there is a tendency in these formations towards the strengthening of what Gramsci called – within the context of his ‘extended’ theory of the state, which I examined in Chapter Five – ‘political society’ (the repressive and bureaucratic apparatuses of domination and coercion), while ‘civil society’ (the ensemble of ‘private’ apparatuses through which a class or bloc of classes struggles for hegemony and politico-moral leadership) remains in a subaltern position. These formations, in sum, would be closer to the ‘East’ than to the ‘West’.

If the Gramscian distinction between ‘East’ and ‘West’ were understood statically, an inevitable conclusion would follow: as the form of development adopted by Brazil was passive revolution, the Brazilian social formation would have to be ‘Eastern’, and so it would be impossible to apply the ‘extended’ theory of the state to Brazil. Gramsci’s reflections would contribute to the understanding of Brazilian society only at historiographical level, but it would not be valid – or it would be only partially valid – for the analysis of our present or the development of alternatives for the future. However, before we accept this conclusion (which would certainly please the few followers of ‘Marxism-Leninism’ in today’s Brazil), we must examine more closely the Gramscian definitions of ‘East’ and ‘West’. Let us recall Gramsci’s famous passage:

In the East the State was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous; in the West, there was a proper relation between State and civil society, and when the State trembled a sturdy structure of civil society was at once revealed. The State was only an outer ditch, behind which there stood a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks: more or less numerous from one State to the next, it goes without saying – but this precisely necessitated an accurate reconnaissance of each individual country.²⁵

I have noted, in the course of this book, that Gramsci created this distinction in order to provide a theoretical answer to a precise practical question: it was necessary to explain why the strategic model of the Bolsheviks had failed in the most developed countries of Western Europe. As he showed that the state had taken on an 'extended' form in these countries, Gramsci was able to formulate a new strategy that would be able to replace 'war of movement', which worked in the 'East' and so was used successfully in Russia, for the 'war of position', which would fit the struggle for socialism in the 'West'. As Gramsci chose geographical metaphors, one might imagine that he conceived of the distinction between 'East' and 'West' as something static. I have already indicated that this assumption is false: for him, the 'Western' quality of a social formation is the result of a historical process. Gramsci does not restrict himself to noting the synchronic presence of formations of 'Eastern' and 'Western' type, but also indicates socio-historic, diachronic processes that cause a social formation to become 'Western' or, more concretely, to have an 'extended' state in which there is a 'correct relationship' between state and civil society.

As we have tried to show in Chapter Six, the need for a new Marxist theory of the state – and, therefore, for a new socialist strategy – is not imposed only the synchronic existence of 'Eastern' and 'Western' formations, but also by the diachronic difference, within societies that are currently 'Western', between periods defined by a weakness in popular organisations, and periods defined by an intense socialisation of politics. In this sense, Gramsci notes that 'war of movement' is not valid just for clearly 'Eastern' absolutist or despotic states, but also for the oligarchic liberal states from the first half of the nineteenth century; by contrast, the 'war of position' becomes valid for the liberal-democratic modern states. One can also imagine – even though Gramsci did not explicitly say anything on the matter – that the 'Westernisation' process he described as particular to European societies could also take place, in different times, and in late fashion, in other regions of the world. Such would be the

25. Gramsci 1975, p. 866; 1971b, p. 238.

case not only of Japan, an 'Eastern' country geographically speaking, but also – and herein lies our greatest interest – of many countries in Latin America.²⁶

Now we must answer a fundamental question: is Brazilian society 'Eastern' or 'Western'? In other words, once we accept the idea that the dynamics of 'Westernisation' are a potentially universal phenomenon, how mature is this process in the case of Brazil? The answer has far-reaching implications. On the one hand, it is an indispensable condition for a proper Marxist understanding of the Brazilian society of today. On the other, the choice of the right strategy for the Left in its struggles for democracy and socialism depends largely on this answer.

A general – albeit superficial – perspective on Brazil's historical evolution shows that there has been (as cause and effect of the processes of passive revolution) a long period, comprehending the whole imperial era and part of the republican era, in which Brazilian society displayed features very typical of the 'Eastern' model regarding the relation between the state and civil society. However, it must be clarified that, already in the imperial age (1822–89), there were political parties in Brazil, required by the existence of a parliament. On the other hand, with the proclamation of the republic, the state became officially secular and the Catholic Church ceased to be a 'private apparatus of the state', becoming a 'private apparatus of hegemony' together with the other minority churches.²⁷ Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the processes of popular self-organisation have led to the formation of unions. Other than that, we had relatively long phases in which the régime in force was officially liberal, thus allowing for the development of seeds of civil society. Therefore, in this sense, the Brazilian social formation was never as 'Eastern' as tsarist Russia or pre-revolutionary China. There were, in our past, many particular features that brought us closer to the liberal European societies of the first half of the nineteenth century.

Nevertheless, what makes it possible to affirm the preponderance of points of similarity with the 'Eastern' model is the fact that not only Brazilian society was 'primitive and gelatinous' until a short time ago, but also that the state – contrasting with the aforementioned liberal societies – has always been very strong. During the imperial age, for instance, the actual role of the parliament

26. In one of his essays on Gramsci, Juan Carlos Portantiero (Portantiero 1983, p. 124 ff.) discusses the issue of Latin America being 'Eastern' or 'Western'. Beginning with a sharp distinction between two kinds of 'West' in Gramsci's work, Portantiero claims it is impossible to treat the more developed countries in Latin America (Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Mexico, Uruguay and Venezuela) as 'Eastern' societies, and so he considers them typical cases of a marginal, late 'West'.

27. For the distinction between 'ideological apparatus of the state' and 'private apparatus of hegemony', see Chapter Five below.

(and the role of the parties by consequence) was very small, squeezed by the executive and its vast bureaucratic apparatus. The institution of slavery must also not be forgotten, as it excluded a large part of the population from all rights, even civil ones. I believe that the mere existence of slavery is enough to give credibility to the claim that Brazilian society during the imperial age was mostly 'Eastern'.

This situation did not undergo significant changes after slavery was abolished (1888) and the republic was established (1889). The republic, just like independence, was established by an action 'from above', by a military coup, which prevented the active participation of the popular masses. As a consequence, the power-bloc that prevailed in the so-called First Republic (1889–1930) was as oligarchic as that of the imperial age. The only difference was that the agricultural bourgeoisie connected with coffee-exports became the hegemonic fraction of the oligarchy. The republican-liberal institutions created at the time were unable to encourage the development of a true civil society; Congress remained a mere appendage of the executive, which, in its turn, was reinforced by the presidential system; all political parties had only regional importance and were no more than political machines at the service of regional oligarchies and their transformist policies. On top of that, there was constant use of repression against the attempts at autonomous organisation by the proletariat and the middle-strata during the First Republic: Brazil remained under 'martial law' for a good part of that period, that is, under a situation in which constitutional rights, already restricted, became even more so.

It would be a mistake, however, to ignore the changes that began with the republic and that began asserting themselves in the 1920s. The abolition of slavery and, later, the beginning of the industrialisation process turned capitalism into the prevailing mode of production in Brazil. The social structure of the country became more complex, more modern, even if that modernity remained strictly associated with precapitalist backwardness, especially in the countryside. In spite of the repression, the new classes and social strata opposed the oligarchic power of the First Republic: the workers' unions grew, and the economic and political strikes increased; the middle-strata demanded greater participation in the public sphere, while, in the political vanguard, the *Tenentes* chose the path of armed insurrection.

As we have seen, the ruling classes reacted to these pressures 'from below' with a new passive revolution, the so-called 'Revolution of 1930', through which the more modern sectors of the agrarian oligarchy achieved an hegemonic position within the power-bloc, co-opting at the same time the more moderate wing of the leadership of the middle-classes, the lieutenants. This solution 'from above' partly blocked the 'Westernising' tendencies that had

been emerging in the previous decade: but only partly. I have mentioned this period of Brazilian life, and particularly the conditions that produced the Vargas dictatorship in 1937. Now we must simply recall that the capitalist modernisation of Brazil was reinforced during the 1930s, and during Vargas's 'New State' above all. The objective conditions for an autonomous civil society had been created; their subjective results (that is, the formation of apparatuses of hegemony independent from the state) could, certainly, undergo a repressive process, as in the Vargas dictatorship; but, in themselves, those conditions could no longer be eliminated.

In 1945, as the dictatorship ended and democracy was re-established (albeit to a limited extent), the process of 'Westernisation' of Brazilian society became even clearer. The Brazilian Communist Party (PCB) was no longer outlawed and for the first (and only, until now) time became a mass-party, obtaining some ten percent of the votes in the 1946 election. The other parties born at this moment acquired national scope and a clearer ideological profile. The unions also became ever more influential in the economic and political life of the country, even though they remained subordinate to a corporatist structure. In spite of a few regressive episodes (such as the outlawing of the PCB in 1947), the tendency towards 'Westernisation' in Brazilian society continued to prevail, becoming even stronger in the years 1950–64.

This tendency was obviously interrupted by the 1964 *coup d'état*, which marked the beginning of the longest dictatorship in Brazilian history. The military régime then-established sought by all means, especially after 1968, to break the autonomous organisations of civil society. At the same time, the extraordinary strengthening of the state – not just its repressive apparatuses, but also its countless technocratic organisms for intervening in the economy – contributed to 'unbalance' the relationship between state and civil society, leaving the latter an apparently insufficiently-'Western' character. In spite of everything, however, civil society – though at times severely repressed – always maintained some real autonomy. More than that, from the mid-1970s onwards, it grew and became diversified, as a strong movement towards self-organisation took hold of workers, peasants, women, the youth, the middle-strata, intellectuals and even some sectors of the bourgeoisie. The 1984 mass-movement in favour of direct elections for the presidency played a decisive role in definitively putting down the military dictatorship, the culmination of this whole process of strengthening of civil society, which took proportions thus far unheard of in Brazil.

How could we explain the apparent paradox of a civil society growing and widening its autonomy under a dictatorial régime? Before all else, we must recall that the Brazilian military régime, in spite of the intense use of coercion and even of state-terrorism, especially in the years 1969–76, was never a classic

fascist dictatorship, that is, it was not a reactionary régime with organised mass-bases.²⁸ The Brazilian military régime was supported by the military-technocratic stratum; it was unable to create organisms adequate to the conquest of true hegemony over civil society, and to make these apparatuses work as the 'transmission-belts' of a totalitarian state, as had happened in Italy and Germany. In order to achieve a minimal consensus, the dictatorship had to suffer the presence of Congress (albeit crippled) and of an opposition-party, the Brazilian Democratic Movement (MDB), which gradually became a broad political front for all anti-dictatorship forces. It is true that the régime made an effort to conquer the consensus of large segments of the people. But the consensus it sought (and sometimes obtained) was always passive, taking for granted the atomisation of the masses, unable to express itself through organisations that could actively support the dictatorship from below. The régime, in sum, was 'de-mobilising'. Its ideological legitimisation was not fascist. It was, rather, a sort of 'ideology of anti-ideology', that is, a technocratic pragmatism that set 'efficiency' against ideologies in general and political conflicts, which were accused of 'dividing the nation' and therefore of putting at risk the necessary 'security' for economic development.

With the crisis of the so-called 'economic miracle' (that is, the great development that took place in the first years of the 1970s), which became conspicuous in 1974, this legitimisation-attempt began to collapse, as shown by the defeats suffered by the régime in the congressional elections of 1974, 1978 and 1982. It soon lost its bases of consensus, not just among the middle-strata, but even among many segments of the monopolist bourgeoisie that previously had determinedly supported it. Within the context of this profound crisis of legitimacy, the apparatuses of civil society could return once again, now hegemonised by broad spectrum of anti-dictatorial forces, ranging from the socialist Left to 'enlightened' conservatives. The 'sorcerer' had unleashed forces it could no longer control. As it advanced an economic policy aimed at serious modernisation, the dictatorship promoted a formidable development of productive forces: Brazil entered the stage of monopolist state-capitalism under the banner of a 'revolution-restoration'. Such modernisation – even though 'conservative' to the extent that it preserved and strengthened dependence on imperialism, regional disparities and the uneven distribution of property and wealth – irreversibly consolidated the objective conditions for the 'Westernisation' of Brazilian society.

28. As I indicated in Chapter Three, this conception of fascism comes from Gramsci. It was developed by Togliatti 1970.

Herein lies the origin of the crisis of the Third-Internationalist interpretative models peculiar to the old Left. As Brazil is now a 'Western' society, it was thus no longer possible to conceive of forms of transition to socialism centred on 'war of movement', on the frontal attack on the coercive apparatuses of the state, in revolutionary ruptures understood as violent explosions concentrated in a short lapse of time. A modern Left also began to rise in Brazil, dispersed across different parties and organisations, but sharing the assimilation of an essential lesson from Gramscian strategy: the goal of the popular forces is to conquer hegemony, in the course of a hard and prolonged 'war of position'. In the case of Brazil, that means that the consolidation of political democracy, as well as its subsequent growth into a 'mass-democracy',²⁹ must be considered as a starting-point and, at the same time, a permanent condition for our path to socialism.

Thus, Gramsci's thought is able to provide insights not only for the interpretation of our past, by means of concepts like 'passive revolution' and 'transformism', but also for the analysis of our present, by means of the notion of 'extended state'. It can also contribute to the creation of a strategy for the struggle for democracy and socialism, conceived as a long 'war of position' based on the conquest of hegemony. It is here that we must locate the roots of Gramsci's great influence in contemporary Brazil, and particularly of his fundamental role in the ongoing process of self-criticism and modernisation of the Brazilian Left.

However, those who have 'adopted' Gramsci in Brazil and who try to translate him to Brazilian reality cannot forget one of his most lucid methodological warnings. After lamenting the fact that Lenin's premature death had prevented him from further pursuing his intuitions on the difference between 'East' and 'West', Gramsci presents the 'fundamental task' of a true Marxist thinker:

Ilitch [Lenin], however, did not have time to expand his formula – though it should be borne in mind that he could only have expanded it theoretically, whereas the fundamental task was a national one; that is to say it required a reconnaissance of the terrain and identification of the elements of trench and fortress represented by the elements of civil society...[The terrain differs] from one State to the next, it goes without saying – but this precisely necessitated an accurate reconnaissance of each individual country.³⁰

29. I use the concept of 'mass-democracy' in the sense ascribed to it by Pietro Ingrao. See for instance Ingrao 1977.

30. Gramsci 1975, p. 866; 1971b, p. 235.

Without denying the progress already made, it is necessary to acknowledge that such reconnaissance, in the Brazilian case, remains mostly incomplete.

Gramsci's present relevance is the reason why he achieved *en maître à penser* a space of his own in Brazilian cultural life. Fifty years after his arrival in our country, Gramsci has all his papers in order: today he is, in his own right, a Brazilian citizen.

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